

2018

Earthship

Daniel Stephensen
University of Wollongong

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/theses1>

University of Wollongong

Copyright Warning

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study. The University does not authorise you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site.

You are reminded of the following: This work is copyright. Apart from any use permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part of this work may be reproduced by any process, nor may any other exclusive right be exercised, without the permission of the author. Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright. A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. A court may impose penalties and award damages in relation to offences and infringements relating to copyright material.

Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.

Unless otherwise indicated, the views expressed in this thesis are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the University of Wollongong.

Recommended Citation

Stephensen, Daniel, Earthship, Doctor of Philosophy thesis, School of the Arts, English and Media, University of Wollongong, 2018. <https://ro.uow.edu.au/theses1/224>



Earthship

Daniel Stephensen

Supervisors:

Professor Catherine Cole and Professor Ian Buchanan

This thesis is presented as part of the requirements for the conferral of the degree:

Doctor of Philosophy

This research has been conducted with the support of the Australian Government
Research Training Program Scholarship.

The University of Wollongong

School of the Arts, English and Media

March 2018

Declaration

I, Daniel Owen Stephensen, declare that this thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the conferral of the degree Doctor of Philosophy, from the University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Daniel Stephensen

March 7, 2018

Abstract

This thesis consists of a science fiction novel, *Earthship*, and a critical dissertation, ‘Why Write Poetically? : A dissertation on poetic attention’. *Earthship* is the story of Lasja Zertov, a human born *en route* between planets Earth and Serinthea, and her flight from the murderous purge of Earthlings in her home city, Aphrinea. The thesis addresses the problem of how to represent ‘humanness’, at the level of language, when the experience is figural, governed by vague essences that resist specification.

Examining poetry by Paul Celan and T.S. Eliot, I explore how poems solve the problem of language’s insufficiency to represent the figural by making language a way of paying attention. I propose an allegorical practice of writing that is organised by a process of poetic attention: intuitive, participatory encounters with the figural reveal patterns in a field of possibility that is stabilised in relation to the figural in itself, and language is added to these patterns in events of poetic writing. I relate this practice to *Earthship*, arguing that a science fiction novel, like a poem, literalises the figural, in order to stabilise allegorical routes and correspondences between words, between language patterns across a narrative, and between language and what remains unspoken, toward which poetic writing reaches. For a reader, these are routes toward attentive, participatory encounters with the figural, with vague essences and corporealities to which the science fiction narrative pays attention.

Acknowledgements

Thank you Professor Catherine Cole and Professor Ian Buchanan for your support, advice, and encouragement. Thank you Dr Michael Griffiths for your valuable critique.

These words have no home but in you:

Inez Baranay, Jennifer Levasseur, Kevin Rabalais, Joy Chen, Travis Lau, Stuart Wilson, Victoria Hannan, Liesl Pfeffer, Robyn and Ivar Stephensen.

‘Why Write Poetically?’ is dedicated to my dear friend Travis Chi Wing Lau.

The silences I dedicate to you, Ellie. What remains is in our correspondence.

Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	ii
<i>Earthship</i>	1
Why Write Poetically? A dissertation on poetic attention	
Introduction	326
Chapter One The stabilising influence of poetic writing and the poem's uninscribed page	373
Chapter Two Patterning language: Paying attention to 'pattern' in T.S. Eliot's <i>Four Quartets</i>	396
Chapter Three Poetic attention and poetic writing in <i>Earthship</i>	409
Conclusion	427
Bibliography	431

Earthship

For Christina

To E.C. —

All worlds in our reach

Make flight, for the land is full of bloody crimes! Renounced and bountied, Earthlings
hide away in Aphrinea, a city like a sand dune, shifting and reshaping. Here Lasja ends,
here she begins. We writhe in the moonlight. By the vanishing glow of Ursu, the
guardian sun, mercenaries from many worlds are on the hunt.

I am your learning companion. Smeared across the lips of death and life, I passed with
lelk through three bodies, unto her: Satu, Bahar, and Marieta; mother, lover, disguise.

Give me now my Lasja, and, if she shall perish, take her and unfold her, and cut her
into stars, and let them back to Nature, to the threshold of the void. And nor by chance
nor fortune will she live, while sheer endurance is the meaning of a life; but as she
endures I'll stake my wits and shake the flesh and spirit of my wearied host.

Here I end, here I begin. Here I spread and set my charms. And now the words, all
mine: I came upon them in her mind.

— *Aux*

IN TWO GREAT BREATHS
ALL YOUNG DREAMS GO RUSHING FROM HER

Once I was a girl and they killed us all

‘Up, you corpses! Up, up!’

And who hisses there now, over by the door? Is it mama’s voice, Lasja? Lump of dread! But no, it can’t be, not true mama, mama-true...

‘Get up, curse you! Get out!’

O! Spider, spider on your ankle, Lasja, don’t move, don’t jump...

‘Mammal shit! What do I care if they kill you? I should kill you myself!’

A fury! Calm Lasja, she put her hand over the little purple spiderlegged thing and closed it in, gentle and kind. The spider nestled to her and tapped its legs and oscillated, waiting for her to lift it to freedom. It tapped harder. With faint warmth the lys pulse in her palm beat in time with the spider’s legs. Lasja reached up to the window sill and opened her hand, tender caravan, and the spider followed the ribbon of lys trickling through the gap beneath the curtain. It ran up over the back of her fingers and away.

‘Worm spit! They’re coming for you, you hear me? I’ve invited them here, I’m shown them the way, you see? I know the changes, I’ve guided them here! You’re dead, you see? You’re all dead!’

The voice harangued in Serinthean, and so indeed it could not be mama-true, who never learned to speak a word in anything but old Earth English. Lazybones! And for all Lasja knew, mama-true was long gone, too, as they say, like all the others who’d ever passed through Earthship, and the château itself, now dead and ruined all, long gone and never coming back. But mama-true Satu, mama-cat Bahar, mama Marieta, they weren’t at Earthship, were they? When the missiles came? Mama-cat came later,

came out from Qim to Aphrinea to find you, darling Lasja. Not everyone's lives hold so many motherly loves.

But why mama-cat? Why call her that?

'Mama-cat,' she whispered.

'Shh.'

A hand on her arm. Steady.

'Don't leave your ghosts in my place, you lysless hags!' hissed no-mama-of-hers.

'Get out, they're coming for you!

With that, the voice slipped away. And soft, our own reunion:

Critical threats multiple and imminent.

This unremarkable voice swept across her mind like a gleam on a motionless meadow. And hers, inward turned:

Quiet, Aux! Help, or stay quiet.

Mere thoughts to the machine, Aux, right there in her brain, the voice behind her ears. What could thoughts do? Dispatching them returned pain, a swift electrical shiver—*s-s-s-SNAP*—behind her brow and back again.

The ache at the top of her spine tightened out across her shoulders.

Down the hall, no-mama-hers was shouting up the stairs, curses in the old Bolesu patois that Lasja could not speak.

'Damn it,' muttered mama-cat, beside her. 'She wants to camp out in the stairwell now?'

'The innkeeper,' Lasja exclaimed. 'I remember!'

'Shh!'

'Shut up!'

‘Sock it, kid!’

Be still, Lasja.

I remembered, Aux!

Be still.

Voices round the room:

‘Someone cut that girl’s tongue out...’

‘Cut your own goddamn tongue out, old goat!’

‘Don’t you talk to my sister like that, you. I’ll have your eyes!’

‘Quiet! Will you idiots please for God’s sake shut up!’

O, Aux, I fear I’ll never again keep a straight thought. How do I go on?

Be still, Lasja.

Lasja...

Her heart tripped.

Why put on voices, Aux?

Lasja...

That! Stop it, Aux!

Not I, Lasja.

She heard a gasp at her ear; pain or pleasure? Shiver, shiver... fear bloomed in her hips and legs, bloomed up her spine and round her ribs, into her clavicles and up her neck, a tightening pain.

‘They’re coming!’ came the innkeeper’s voice, bouncing up the stairs. She was most unhappily disposed to Earthlings.

Lasja...

‘For the Aym!’

Who is that? You! Who speaks?

Critical threats...

Aux! There's another voice. Who is that?

Critical threats imminent.

'What's that Aux saying?' hissed mama-cat.

What's that Bahar saying? Two xenofoms at the window.

Watch it, Aux. Don't be smart.

Two xenofoms at the window overhead. Be careful. Be still.

'Two forms at the window,' said Lasja.

'O, what a misery,' Bahar complained. 'Gather yourself to move, kiddo. It's not going to get better for us here.'

Lasja watched the faint, swirling, silvery mist of lys seeping into the dining room under the black velvet curtain. Her heart lumped and thumped. Leik sparkled the tendrils of lys, fluttering and dashing them in warm pink arcs. She could feel them in her skin, in her own pulse and conduction.

'Up! Get out!' cried the innkeeper.

Haven't I helped you, Lasja?

Shh, Aux! Look...

'Mama-cat, look,' she whispered. 'Leik.'

'So it is. Stay still.'

'Old leik... Old leik, bold leik...'

Be still, Lasja.

The innkeeper appeared at the door again, blue-faced.

'Infections! Corpse slime! Rat pus!'

Lasja...

‘Star killers! This is all your fault. Get out, get out!’

‘Let us pass,’ someone pleaded, and another: ‘Give us safety, please!’ These other Earthling voices Lasja did not recognise, Earthlings local to Aphrinea and not from Château Earthship, so many had made their own ways to Johir and Serinthea in recent times. All were women, most human, curled in fear like she and Bahar on the cold stone floor under the haze of lys. They stirred and muttered and shushed one another, trading tired glares, and the innkeeper cursed them all again and stormed away.

Lasja...

Stop it, Aux!

Not I, Lasja.

...s-s-s-SNAP!

The pain, the pain swept through her again, a lazy agony, and dizziness came after it, dark and cold, and through this pressed the voice, her strange familiar:

Lasja!

The spiced scent of burning auhlumn hair, just for a moment.

‘Get up, kid,’ Bahar was saying. ‘Come on, get up,’ urgent, trying to lift her head from the stones. On first try, Lasja couldn’t get her body to move. A soft weight pressed her down under the prickling silvery mist of lys that crept across the room like a witch’s hand. She shuddered against the earnest force—

s-s-s-SNAP!

—and the hard electrical pain bloomed through her neck and jaw, trickling through a tangle in her poor tired brain. Lasja fell back, gasping, balanced faint on a fat bulge of nausea. A bubble rose to her throat and pressed out in a belch.

‘Quiet, will you!’

‘Shh!’

Lasja...

The silver lys reached down to her in small funnels, and her own lys simmered and ached in her skin, reaching out. And once more the Aym’s voice rang out through Aphrinea, reverberating among the shifting sheaths of crystal lys around the city’s buildings:

‘Planets of light and lys! Serinthea, Johir, and her lover Imul! I am scourge of xenoforms whose blood is the mark of death!’

Once I was a girl and they killed us all and I was buried in rubble and blood.

Lasja...

O, how slender the line, dear Lasja, between home and exile, between sanctuary and mayhem! One day you are free and safe, the next you are prey, condemned, chased and outlawed, your very body a disease, a pest to be hunted, and so declared by the Aym Seil Ilse:

‘Come all, come defenders of the true and rightful sun-phase Ilsu! Come overthrow the sun-phase Ursu and rid our planet and our city of her xenoform plague!’

Lasja wanted to pull herself up to the window and look out and see the creatures muttering outside, making themselves understood in halting Serinthean expressed through voxboxes. They were mercenaries, bounty hunters. For days now, since the massive generation ship *Runeberg* plunged across the sky, all bounty hunters in the Ursu system had been free and welcome to ply their trade in Aphrinea. The Aym Seil Ilse wanted the city cleansed of Earthlings.

Lasja sat up and cupped her ear. She could hear a third voice, a halting cyborg rasp:

‘Aym threw the starship,’ in lumpish Imul.

‘Seil Ilse?’

‘Who else!’

s-s-s-SNAP!

Tra-la! Pain cracked across Lasja’s brain, and down she came, *thump*.

O, Lasja, darling Lasja!

Aside, child:

What do you miss from your long young life?

Lasja...

What do you miss, here, curled up a-quiver with Bahar beneath the leaking window, beneath the mist of silvery lys, beneath lelk poking holes in it to pry at you? Curious lelk...

What do you miss? Do you miss brushing your teeth?

Lasja...

Poor teeth! And your hair? Do you bring to mind all the ways of brushing and braiding hair you have perfected? Yes, yes, poor hair.

Lasja!

And your books, darling? Do you miss those? O, yes, almost more than anything, those marvellous books all gone up in smoke now, poor books! Burned up with Earthship...

Poor Lasja.

Shut up, Aux. Just shut up.

Aux tested concepts of pity.

The window, Lasja.

Poor books, poor Aux, stuck with a brain like mine.

Lasja...

Don't you want to get away from me, Aux?

Her hairbrush had red and white poppies on it, and the softest bristles, and now it was gone, melted away, bristles burned. Every solid object in her life, all her dear companions, gone, burned to ashes, so too her auhlumn friends out in the woods across the Blaise, burned and gone, and the Blaise itself, their little stream at Earthship, at the bottom of their grassy hill, gone, gone, oil slick and aflame, and gone all those wise fish who had returned to this world to serve all life as flowing water.

The hairbrush had belonged to Sem Morrow's mother. He gave it to Lasja as a birthday gift, with a yellow silk ribbon tied around its handle. Two birthdays ago? Perhaps, perhaps, though time here was measured out in seasons of lys, beautiful silvery lys, with which the moon Lu-Serir draped her companion planet Serinthea, night after night. Slow, slippery sheets of lys. As the sun Ursu turned back to Serinthea, by day her light would evaporate much of the lys before it crystallised, so keeping sun and moon and planet in balance, Ursu and Lu-Serir and Serinthea. But without Ursu's daily care, blind Lu-Serir would transform gentle Serinthea into an enormous lys crystal, and then what would become of us? We must succeed this peasant world and evolve, declaimed the Aym Seil Ilse's augurs. We must become the first native beings of a lys star? And the augurs pronounced this, over and over, and soon it was believed; but stay your heart, what's this creation? A *lys* star? There's no such thing, snapped mama-cat. What a heap of fucking nonsense.

Lasja...

O, dear child of love and lelk!

Red and white poppies, yellow ribbon. Lasja's simple strategy had been to brush her hair whenever the brush was at hand. Her hair fell long and straight, sometimes black and sometimes darker, a deeper rejection of light, and it was soft, she washed it with water from the Blaise, and every so often, in a mood of elegance, she would massage crushed lavender flowers into her scalp, flowers from the garden behind the château called Earthship.

Sem Morrow, her mother's friend, her father's friend, the groundskeeper at Earthship, and Yelsa Manos's lover, on and off, here and there, adventurer and pilot—Sem would remember birthdays for her. She did not always remember. Every passing Earth year, recorded by Sem Morrow, she received from him a birthday gift. He remembered this and other dates for her.

But this she remembers. On her seventeenth Earthling birthday, he gave her a bell, a baby blue bicycle bell.

'Ring this when you need me,' he said, folding it into her hands, folding his big hard hands over hers. 'I'll find you.'

Tears filled her eyes. Poor bell! Poor long lost bell... *I'll find you!*... But she never rang it, she had her own understanding of what he meant by *when you need me* and she would not test his promise on a whim. By the time she really needed him it was too late, the bell was already lost. Still, should she ever find it, and ring it, he would come, he would be right there, she knew that absolutely. Wayward and vicious he had been in youth, Sem Morrow, but he matured himself into a man of kindness and compassion, and he was devoted to Lasja as if she were his own beloved daughter.

Every girl, she guessed, every girl, just like me, wants a friend to come with her through life evermore, someone sweet and tender as Sem Morrow, and capable as he,

and strong of mind and heart, and kind and honest. But no more could he stay with her than anyone she ever loved. They are always pushed away, they always find a way to leave, or make themselves a reason.

Lasja...

Gone, long gone, poor bell! Poor brush, poor teeth, poor Sem, poor Earthship...

Poor Aux! To be stuck in a head so sentimental... I'm sorry, Aux.

I am your learning companion.

Sem Morrow made Earthship a home for Lasja. He planted the trees she liked, the hoop pines and orange trees especially, and carrots and zucchini in the garden, and cabbage for kimchi, and beetroot and spinach, plantains and yams, and flowers, too, pretty lavender and elegant old garden roses to protect his little vineyard, and marigolds, and olive trees. He built the billy-goat bridge across the Blaise to the auhlumn woods, and it was Sem who first befriended the auhlumn living there. These mammals, sometimes bipedal, sometimes wolfish quadrupeds, sometimes spirit familiars of the trees, were the native keepers of the land around the Blaise, and they allowed Sem to remain and to return. From the auhlumn, too, he sought permission to keep the château where it was. Long before Sem arrived, the château had been brought out, every stone and tile, from Earth, and rebuilt on this hill above the Blaise without due consultation and communion with the auhlumn. Sem Morrow rectified this error.

By and by, he made Earthship into a home for friends and acquaintances from the Sol system who had nowhere left to go. Hounded and censored, arrested, imprisoned, tortured, exiled, they came or were sent through the slipstream to the Ursu system, and arrived at Serinthea seeking any haven. Earth had been degraded, abandoned to ruin. They were artists, painters, writers, sculptors, poets, actors, musicians, and machiners,

coders, designers. They came to Earthship and became the angels in Sem's soul, and serving them, at the château, he cobbled together an identity for himself, to supplant the violent youth in him. To kill for a cause, as the youth had done, is nonetheless to kill. To kill for faith is nonetheless to kill. Murder injures the soul, it injures the mind and memory. Murder spills stifling and cold over every sensation of life. Now you have killed. You can kill again; you need not, but you can. The seal is broken, and what a thin wax it was all along.

To those who made their way to Earthship, Sem Morrow gave all he had. He gave them a home, food, and work. Some became residents, some stayed till the last day. Some departed to Aphrinea, the nearby city, and some set out for farther worlds. Seldom did anyone return to Earth, for what remained there for them? What use could they be?

But no more of all that, now.

No more guests, no residents, no home, no château Earthship, no more open-armed welcomes, old Sem Morrow to greet them, salvation in his smile, no more haven, no more homegrown banquets, songs and poems, stories, recitals in the garden, no more walks across the Blaise into the woods, or rendezvous deep in dark with the auhlumn, no more, no more.

Move, Lasja.

The pain exceeded her. She strained to push herself through it, the twin motion of her life, a hot wall of pain and her strain to push onward...

But here now, dear one, slipstream child, where will you go? Where have you come to in your flight, and which direction hence? No way home, Earthship destroyed, your tetchy sun in a sulk fit to ruin you, and whither goest thou? She turns away, Ursu,

withdraws her light from you and your society, and in the lys breath of Lu-Serir, companion moon, you grow pale as old shell, your black hair whitens, your lips purple, and the oldest lelkh in your body make passages to flee, these lelkh folded through you from the start, and even prior, folded through at the lip of the wayhole between worlds, lelkh from within the slipstream, there as Nature stopped your mother in her flight to birth you.

Fickle sun! Fickle lelkh!

Lasja...

Lelkh came with the mist of lys from Lu-Serir, lelkh from deep within the companion moon, and they trickled pink through the lys and drifted down to reach out in ribbons and tug inquisitively at her skin.

Move, Lasja.

Pain crawled around her body. Without Ursu's light to break up and evaporate the lys, the pain would worsen. O, Lasja, darling Lasja!—after all, you're human, all too human. You do not always remember. Already your skin has lost its russet glow, your summer eyes, unsparkled, stained the colour of morning piss.

Lasja...

Move, move... Tra-la!

You'll give away your treasure, darling.

Lasja!

Voices muddled in memory. 'Keep this safe for me,' she heard Sem *s-s-s-SNAP!*—Ah! Tra-la!—she heard him *say*... 'O, heaven, heaven!'... who's that there telling the story of Lasja and Sem?

Aux...

I am your learning companion.

A book, keep this safe, he told her, a precious book, a cherished book, how dearly he loved his old books, Sem Morrow! And this one she loved just as well, *A Gentle Evening-Weariness*, Yelsa's first novel, more treasure to Lasja than the sunken hoard of Lafitte! And her love for it was all the more encompassing, being as it was that Sem and Yelsa had been lovers, and even married, though Lasja did not know for certain, and he, curmudgeon, would not tell.

Another time, another story. And what of the book? *Whoof!* Gone! That old thing gone, gone up in smoke, long gone like all of Earthship. Yet Lasja could open her hands and see it clearly, she knew those pages like her own skin, she could have transcribed every word. She does not always remember, and sometimes cannot forget.

But the thing itself, burned up and gone, long gone, and with it Yelsa's shy inscription to Sem, dust to dust, good-bye, good-bye...

To Sem,

With past hope to last us

Yelsa x

Lasja shrank away from the slowly swirling mist of lys, away from the other huddled, frightened bodies laid low in this makeshift redoubt. Lelk clung to her, sparkling, and came a rush of visions and sensations of other minds, pressed fast to her as if she *must* remember.

What *are* you, child?

As if all this were natural, her essence. During the siege of Venus, the translator Evelyn Demare committed to memory, Lasja recalled, the *Intuitions* of the Venusian poet and sculptor known as Rul. After Salgar Byre destroyed the cloud villages, Rul fled or was kidnapped into the old pirate slipstream and was never seen again. To his own disgrace, Sem Morrow found himself involved in the raid on Venus, having been indentured to Byre's mercenary enterprise in payment of a family debt. As if they were her memories, she saw Sem's mayhem and felt the awful contortions of his fear and fury. She saw the cloud villages crumble away in beautiful orchids of flame that swelled and bloomed in the terraformed sky.

And the visions ran through her, skipping from lel to lel, from lel her skin to lel spiralling down from the misted lys. As they left her body, she felt her native pain spike through her everywhere, the same insistent pain her mother had suffered for most of her life. Nothing stopped it. Nothing changed it. It was a hard, scathing, meaningless pain, unrelated to injury, a pain that caused itself, made more of itself, and only for the sake of its own motion. Lasja was simply in its way. Countless sharp teeth, sunk into her, were slowly tearing her apart, a lifetime's work. Dream had kept her mother sane. We all lose our way in the end.

Good-bye, good-bye...

She could hear folk songs of the Venusian resistance, those mama-true Satu and mama Marieta had written together and sung so often in many houses, many living rooms, many basements, and her father Jack's songs, too, papa Jack the famous crooner, his songs written for the Spacefarers of the Allied Faith, to lift spirits in the long, patchy war against the terrorist Epir.

I was there in that Venusian sky, out there in the fire...

Lasja!

Critical threats imminent.

O, precious jumble!

Lelk spun spiderly down from the haze of lys, and Yelsa's words to Sem came clear to her again, handwritten in blue ink: *With past hope to last us*. Sem's copy of *A Gentle Evening-Weariness* was a Pio Paperback, first edition, with the epigraph that did not appear in successive printings because it was thought too long, too unsettling, a passage from Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*:

They are the true ones, no longer animal, the philosophers and artists and saints; and Nature, which never leaps, has made this one joyous leap to make them, and with this knows its goal has been attained. Here Nature must cease, and unlearn having goals: stakes at the game of life and being have grown too high. And this knowledge transfigures Nature, and a gentle evening-weariness, that which we call beauty, comes to rest upon its face.

Translated by Yelsa herself, with her inscription beneath it. And long and often had Lasja lingered over the hurried, maybe nervous, maybe insouciant little kiss—Yelsa x—a familiar kiss, given in a rush and somehow hesitant, wary, but impassioned, she was certain, *Take my heart...*

What use are memories of love? They hold nothing, not even themselves, they unfold and refold, shift and melt away, return warped, and for what? Food for envy?

They have not the slightest clue where they lost their way. They have not yet separated. Peregrine light: Lasja sees with Sem Morrow's memory, like a Dreamer, but without Dream, she sees with the lelk in her body. Sem and Yelsa make between them a shape of desire through which to share their bodies. She sees. She fills *him*. Which of you will you become, Lasja, the Earthling or the alien? She looks down at her short, bruised, scarred legs, watching him there crouched between her thighs, lapping as if at a sparkling pond. She laughs with pleasure at his low, rough growl. He presses an arrowhead of fingers into her. Their aura is intricately smooth. Quickly it is here, here... demanded... required... stammering through her, here! Quick, quick... and with a startled cry she spills it into his mouth, down his neck, down his chin into his cupped hands, anointing him with it. She seizes against him with violent need, it goes on and on inside her, shaking her thighs, her weak heart, dripping from her, and he raises her and drinks it in, sips her round the soft rim, and then the other, its firmer sweetness. All happiness in the natural world is theirs. They do not always remember. Other times, in want of Sem, Yelsa traced him with her fingertip upon herself; what use are all these memories? She needed him, she did not need him, bring your body, I want you to leave. A sun folds its wings to sleep, and come other voices, unsecured memories in the dying light.

All this has passed, and the life was hers, and shared among them all, Yelsa and Sem and Lasja. Aux remembers.

Lelk stood out from Lasja's skin like fur. She traced the little x upon the organ of memory, the first stroke clear and firm, its companion crossing lighter, quicker. Perhaps Yelsa had wanted to show him enough of her love that he could feel how it was consuming her, without allowing him to claim her heart. She did not want to be

claimed. Perhaps, Lasja dreamed, this was because Yelsa felt worn down beyond deliverance, and so she knew she could not sustain enough love and hope for them both.

Lasja!

I'm here, I'm right here! No need to shout.

Not I, Lasja.

What?

It is another. Not I.

Lasja...

Another what? Speak clearly, Aux! I swear...

A heavy blow struck the walls and shook the room, and shook Lasja, and beneath the lys she gained consciousness, a heaving gasp.

‘Lasja! Get up,’ Bahar was saying. ‘Come on, now. Up!’

I am your learning companion.

Her mouth was furred with lek. The mist of lys shrank back and seemed to watch her, before creeping down again. Lek clung to her skin and clothes, and the air was warm and thick with human odour.

‘O, mama-cat...’

‘We have to go,’ said Bahar. ‘We can’t stay here, we have to *move*, kid.’

‘Yes, yes, let’s go. I’m all right, I’m here, I can move...’

s-s-s-SNAP!

Bells and butterflies. Lasja squirmed on a spike of pain as the window flared alight. Every form in the room curled up and froze.

A stern, loud light came sweeping strong and slow through the window and the curtain, trickling bronze over the haze of lys. It curled and folded through itself, unfolding in fingers, reaching and seeking, palpating the lys. Leik rippled up from Lasja's skin, quivering, spreading out to let the stern light touch them, and as it did, leik muffled the light and reshaped it, dispersing it brightly back up through the haze. The stern light, curling up under the ceiling, broke into clumps and snowed prettily upon the lys, and through it, falling over the huddled Earthling forms. Lasja's skin paled at its touch. Softer than pollen, leik also snowed upon them, soundless, instinctual.

The stern, loud light withdrew through the curtained window and the wall.

Thick air, the sour smell of dirt and ash and sweat at fear. Some of the women huddled on the floor shone longer with leik, but soon they glittered pinkly and rose away from all but Lasja, returning to swirl with the haze of lys. Leik sank into her skin, rippling.

You should have died.

'Come on kid. Get up.'

I'm here.

'O, mama-cat... I'm here...'

She belched a bubble of gall, and gagged and coughed herself ghost grey with the pain of it. Stale tongue: she sat up and spat. Many voices hissed at her, repulsed. Undignified girl!

Her mouth felt full of cuts, and her lip was puffy and split, and there was a painful hole where she had bitten her cheek. The culprit was a jagged broken tooth, loose in its swollen socket.

Up!

Bahar laid a cold, trembling hand on her arm.

‘Take it slow.’

‘I fell asleep... what day is it?’

‘Same fucking day. Come on.’

‘Ursu hasn’t turned back?’

Bahar shook her head.

‘We’re going to fossils if we stay here,’ she said. ‘The city’s moving around.’

Lasja, I have designed a passage from here to Morningcrow.

‘This Aux is out of its mind...’

‘What’s it say?’

New passages.

‘New what?’ Bahar cupped her ear. ‘I can almost hear it. What’s it say?’

‘New passages.’

‘What for?’

‘Now it says it has *Morningcrow* for us.’

‘Ha! About fucking time! Can you beat that? I’m so miserable I’m happy again! Tell that Aux to lead the way.’

Bahar let out a honking laugh, and a wave of angry shushing passed across the room.

‘Ah, pipe down, goddamn ducks. Quack!’

Lasja...

Aux, who is it? Please...

Not I.

I know, not you! Is it... Aux... Aux?

‘Come on now, angel, don’t leave me hanging. What’s that Aux say? Which way?’

Lasja watched the mist of lys drift across the room and seep out through the doorway. It filled the air with little cavities that winked out of sight. As she lifted her hand to it, lelk reached down, tracing little shapes along her fingers and over her palm.

I am your learning companion.

Aux?

New passages of lys compress and crystallise. Clarity at forty per cent, but sufficient.

‘New crystal passages are forming,’ said Lasja. ‘It’s trying to keep up.’

I have designed a passage, Lasja.

‘I guess there’s only one way out of here, anyhow,’ said Bahar. ‘We’ll take our chances.’

Her bright orange eyes were ringed black. A tight smile. A spray of blood across her square-jawed face had dried like the map of a river delta. Her mud-caked hair was tied up in a ragged topknot.

‘Do I have blood on my face?’ Lasja asked.

‘Yes. And soot, and dirt, and auhlumn shit. Come on.’

‘My back is killing me.’

‘Well ain’t you an old dame...’

I am your learning companion.

Stop cycling, Aux! Stay with me, if you’re going to stay.

This is not an option, Lasja. I have formed another passage for you.

Bright rapid visions fluttered across her mind: tunnels of crystallised lys, a flowering meadow, a blood red hole in the sky. She saw *Morningcrow* standing there among the motionless flowers.

O! Little walnut...

You are love in vitamins D, C, A, and niacin, iron, magnesium.

‘I see *Morningcrow*,’ said Lasja. ‘I can see him!’

‘Quiet!’ someone hissed across the room. ‘They’re coming...’

‘Ah, quiet yourself,’ Bahar snapped. ‘Which way, Lasja, window or door? What’s that Aux say? I can’t stand this clucking heap another second. Out the window?’

‘No! Not that way, it’s changed, Aux says...’

I am your learning companion.

‘How changed? Is it looping?’

Aux! Which way?

The door, the tunnel, the square, and up.

‘The door, the tunnel...’

‘What’s that? Door, all right.’

I am your learning companion.

Damn it, Aux, what are you doing?

‘We’ll take our chances,’ said Bahar.

I always know when you’re coming home again...

Two doors stand open, shaking

Bahar pulled aside the corner of the dense curtain, humming a little tune to soothe her jumping nerves. Thick skeins of silvery lys swirled outside, and a little way from the window crouched the twin bodies of a Harag split, one of them burning a knurl of crystal over a short blue flame while the other sucked the vapour through a metal straw.

Here's our chance,' she whispered. 'What're they saying, kid? I can't speak that grunt.'

Lasja, listening to Aux, said, 'Papa used to traffic in these dotworlds, back in the old days. Little wayholes. Aux agrees, don't you Aux? I bet a billion that Sem hid *Morningcrow* in one of those.'

'Say something we can use, Lasja. What dotworld, where?'

'Korhonen... Aux says *Korhonen*.'

Lasja's eyes unclouded.

'Korho'n the loan king? Ha! That grub, holding *Morningcrow* as collateral, you say? I know him proper too, Korhonen the rat, the snake, that demon.' Her eyes narrowed. 'He ripped me off, stole memorabilia from me. I had your mother's dresses, besides the rest...'

Lasja!

I am your learning companion.

'Look at those two out there getting bent. What're they saying? What's that Aux say?'

Haven't I protected you?

What? Is this your idea of protection? What are they saying out there?'

'I miss that stupid Aux,' Bahar grumbled. 'I could've kept it...'

Lasja could hear the two bodies of the Harag split speaking in low voices, speaking Csinoir, a bitten, terse language that shared a grammar with Johir, the native source of Serinthean. But Johir and Serinthean were melodic, soft, breathy. Fluent Csinoir sounded like air drawn tight before a thunderclap.

‘We’ll stay until it hits the planet,’ said the split. ‘That’ll break the pillars, we’ll scoop up the rubble.’

The other half of the split was worried about their window to leave Serinthea. They were trying to work out the timeline of the catastrophe, how long the generation ship *Runeberg* had been held suspended over the city, and when it might break through the straining net of hardened lys that held it up. ‘*Runag*,’ they called it.

‘They think ancient lelk are baked into the Five Pillars,’ said Lasja. ‘That’s what they’re waiting for. They want lelk crystal, they want to smoke it.’

‘There’s a good black market for it,’ said Bahar. ‘What else?’

Aux fed the translation to Lasja, and fed her data at the same time to explain it:

‘*Runeberg*... M-Class Generation Starship, five kilometres long, twenty stories high, ten thousand souls aboard, Earthling, capacity for fifty thousand.’

‘That’s not much.’

‘They’ll pick more up, diversify...’

Critical threats imminent. Critical...

Aux fell silent. Lasja felt a cold absence. Her body ached, her skin most of all, a rolling wave of dull, thick pain.

I am your learning companion.

O, Aux... Please...

‘I hate this planet,’ said half the split.

‘It’s not worth the starlight,’ said the other half. ‘They’d better core it and blow it out of orbit.’

‘I want to go home.’

Bahar peered out under the curtains. The split flickered in the electric orange flares from far above, two horns and two leatherfaced heads attached to a bifurcating mantis body.

‘Up, up!’ shouted the innkeeper, returning to the doorway. ‘I’m telling you to get out! Die out there, not here. Get out, corpses!’

It’s murder what you’re doing, said a voice from a bundle in the corner, tearful and shivering. ‘We’re not at war. You owe us shelter!’

I am your learning companion.

‘Lasja!’ came Bahar’s voice, straining. ‘Get up, kid. I’m not lugging you the whole way. Get up, damn it!’

Bahar’s strong arms pulled her up, hands pulled at her legs. She heard Bahar bark: ‘Let her go!’ and a cry of pain from below.

‘Get down, they’ll see you!’ someone hissed.

They were up and moving. Bahar kicked a path through the terrified bodies laid out on the floor.

Critical threats present.

Ain’t it true that you got what mama’s payin’ for?

Jack Clune and the Company Singers, ‘Ain’t It True’.

Lasja...

‘I can hear Cerym,’ Lasja muttered. ‘I can hear her in my hearing...’

Bahar seized her hand and pulled her on a weaving path through the exhausted forms that cowered and sobbed and shivered on the floor beneath the haze of lys and lel. At the doorway the air was cooler and fresher. Lasja filled her lungs and helped Bahar push aside a gelatinous cadaver of snowy silver lys that had dripped through the ceiling and was crystallising and reshaping the hallway. A sloping crystal path had formed, leading up into the comb-shaped inn. As the lys dripped and shifted it brought to its surface bubbles of dark, soily matter, from which sprouted grey mushrooms and little silver daisies. These bloomed before their eyes from a tangle of dark vines that grew inside the crystallising lys, and just as swiftly matured and died, mushrooms and flowers both, and decayed into a silver crust.

Lasja pulled Bahar up the slope, along the hallway of the next floor and through a muffled crystal tunnel, till she found the little stairs Aux showed her. Climbing these, they came to a trapdoor in a wall from which a chandelier stuck out sideways, straight and quivering.

‘This is some craze,’ said Bahar. ‘Bits and pieces every damn way.’

‘It’s remembering the labyrinth of Lu-Serir,’ said Lasja. ‘So says Aux.’

‘O yeah? A labyrinth, what luck!’

Crawling through the trapdoor, they emerged onto a high gangway of polished crystal, more solid and metallic here. The gangway took them through a short, covered tunnel and out into the night air. Lasja saw it with Aux’s insight. She almost remembered.

Lasja...

Aux, stop!

Not I, Lasja.

The Aym Seil Ilse's voice, resounding through the city:

'Bounties paid for all invasive xenofoms!'

Cerym! Is it you?

'Bounties paid for killing the pestilence of the Sol system!'

Aux... Aux, is it her? Aux!

'Bounties paid for Earthlings! Clear the pests from our streets! Clear the way for air and light... *Csula ket usla!*'

'Soul come sun-heir?' Bahar puzzled over the old Imul words. 'What'd she say?'

'Soul becomes and becomes,' Lasja translated. '*Csula ket usla.*'

I am your learning companion.

'What a lot of bullshit,' said Bahar.

Lasja glared at her.

'These words have power, mama-cat. They are important to me.'

'I don't pray, Lasja. They mean nothing to me.'

'You don't have to pray for words to matter.'

'*Kusla ketusla*, phoney baloney. Those words don't mean shit.'

Critical threats imminent.

'This way,' Lasja said.

'Aym Seil Ilse declares the sunphase Ursu ended!' sang the Aym. 'Ursu returns to Ilsu, rightful phase, darkened by traitors... I am Aym Seil, mother of Ilsu!'

Haven't I loved you?

Shut up, Aux.

Haven't I kept you safe?

Lasja...

‘Let us show strength! Let us take urgent action to purify our planet! *Csula ket usla!*’

I am your learning companion.

‘... Come on, get up, wake up... Lasja!’

‘*Csula ket usla!*’

Soul becomes, becomes...

‘Get up, baby, come on now.’

She does not always remember, but this, the dream story, the myth of the Aym, perhaps this one was true. Seil Ilse was born deep within Lu-Serir, the companion moon, and was raised to become mother of Ilsu, the fabled retrophase sun. Ilsu, it is said, was always the favourite of Lu-Serir, and Ilsu wanted to possess entirely the star she shared with her sister phase Ursu, and their future sibling phases, foreseen by the Bolesu but yet to come. Generations of Bolesu, creatures with bodies of bolesura wood, had carved out a labyrinthine city of crystallised lelkh in the silicate mantle of Lu-Serir. The Bolesu were the original Dreamers, the saints and seers whose souls moved in sympathy with lelkh. Only Bolesu bodies thrived in the heat generated by Lu-Serir’s molten lys core, the thousand-chambered lake of lys that seeped up through the mantle to flow in narrow rivers through the great city.

Enclosed by her father in a suit of bolesura, Seil Ilse was sent to live with the Bolesu inside Lu-Serir, hidden away from Ursu’s light.

Haven’t I loved you? Haven’t I preserved you?

Perhaps I remember.

Perhaps this body is mine.

Lasja saw and felt her long young life unfold and refold through memories not all her own, through echoes of other bodies and minds in which Aux had nestled and persevered. Her mother Satu, and Bahar, and Marieta Escriva each had this Aux before her, they passed it on like an heirloom. Bahar gave it to Lasja. Memories flower like old roads in her mind, sometimes almost clear, sometimes only glimpsed like shadows passed through shadows. Memories swayed and trembled and reshaped her, and ever more keenly Lasja felt herself committed to this world another way, with Aux. She felt herself diverged, yet into herself, a welcoming woman into whose consciousness she was being induced on behalf of some obscure force. *Csula ket usla*. Yet a little while is the light with you.

Before Aux, one long autumn night just before her eighteenth Earthling birthday, thereabouts, Lasja took Sem Morrow's old Mercedes truck and drove out from Aphrinea to Qim.

The truck's battery died in the middle of the dark, bolesura-studded desert, long before the first bubble-shaped crystal homes at the edge of Qim. The battery died, the headlights died, and Lasja in the silvery darkness ran the truck into a bolesura tree.

The moon Lu-Serir and the past sunphase Ilsu favoured Qim over Aphrinea, but Ursu, the present phase, had kept Qim in twilight for countless seasons. When the augurs of Qim, alchemists of lelkh and lys, succeeded at last in increasing the concentration of lelkh in Serinthea's atmosphere, Ursu, a petulant, jealous sunphase, believed she had been rejected by the planet, her light made obsolete and replaced by the aura of lelkh. Ursu darkened herself and began to turn her light away, both from Serinthea and from the star around which she had wrapped herself, the nameless star inherited from her sister Ilsu. At once the augurs brought Seil Ilse from Lu-Serir, to

install her as the Aym of Aphrinea, overthrowing Ursu's disempowered Aym. Waves of violence beset the city, inflicted by a new mercenary army.

As Ursu occluded, lys poured up from the thousand-chambered lake within Lu-Serir, and flowed across the void of space to Serinthea. Ursu, though turning away, went on dissolving the lys as best she could, as was her nature. But at last there was too much, her light was turned too far away, and lys poured through the Serinthean atmosphere, gathering lel, spilling across the bolesura desert in all directions. Along ancient channels it flowed into Qim, where it began to crystallise and erect a new city on top of the old settlement, this city a dreaming shared between Ilsu and Lu-Serir.

Lasja too had set out in the old Mercedes truck along ancient paths. Memory jumbled in her, reverberated: she saw herself sitting, anguished and unkempt, among corpses at the château, the first explosion ringing in her ears. The lys made a slippery fog as it crept across the desert to Qim. Lasja did not drive slowly. The bolesura tree was hard as a ruby comet and the truck collided with it head-on. The tree compressed the front of the truck into Lasja's body. Shattered bone spined through her right arm and leg, and her lys vessels detached and emitted a silvery vaporous cloud that changed form and rapidly crystallised around her. A shard of windshield glass sliced across her face and through her left ear. Her nose dangled like a broken door. The bloody shard hung trapped in the crystalline cloud.

When Bahar found her, a day later, preserved in lys, Lasja was mutilated but alive, and her lys vessels had staunched themselves and grown crystal caps over her ruptured blood vessels.

At the Spacefarers Mission Hospital in Qim, the bearers brought Lasja into the inner ward, the oldest one, directed by the hospital's original hulm. Low, bolesura wood beds

encircled the grey-black, cylindrical hulm, which was raised at the centre of the room on a stone dais. The hulm was tall and ridged around its upper lip like a castle. Silver veins ran through its mottled skin. The bolesura beds softened in its presence, devotedly serving the hulm's directives. The hulm was stronger than bolesura, lighter than a mist of lelkh, and more pervasive in the charted galaxies, in its way, than even the Earthling dataflood. A single hulm, it is said, can hold more knowledge than the entire flood.

The hulm fed Lasja a steady stream of its own lys, pinked with lelkh. And, by and by, these lelkh and the lelkh native to her body merged, and healed and strengthened her to health. They knitted her new skin and muscles and bones, and restored her angular, careworn beauty.

As she healed, the hulm grew little polyps on her arms and legs, and these blossomed into orbs of that peculiar lelkh-folded lys known as Dream. A hulm wastes nothing. The orbs ripened and dropped from Lasja's skin like small plums, leaving her skin soft and smooth where they had grown, and on the bed around her they stretched themselves out, waiting to be taken into other bodies.

Bahar Neiris visited Lasja every day and gathered the orbs. Keeping a body is hard work for a Dream addict. She gathered the orbs and took them back to Aphrinea, selling some and orbing some herself, and as Lasja healed, Bahar, under the guidance of this Dream, entered into a tender yet opaque sympathy with her. Of a similar experience, the Venusian poet Rul wrote:

Now it is pulseblood

Now rays of slipmeaning

Now words storm themselves

Now glow but not emit

Now longing in echo

Now I become her

My heart forever

Helplessly in bloom

Concern and responsibility for Lasja dawned in Bahar, feelings she had not felt since she was with Lasja's mother Satu, companion and lover. But Bahar felt her closeness with Lasja was made of fear, not of love: fear, responsibility, and a foreboding that she could not ignore.

Intuitively understanding what she was to do, Bahar drove from Aphrinea to Qim and showed the doctors at the Spacefarers Hospital how to remove the Aux from her, through her eye socket. Much less troublesome and painful was the procedure of introducing it to Lasja's brain through her nose.

Two doors stand open, shaking.

Aux, at first displeased with being physically removed, soon gained its own understanding of the transition. Keeping a body is an Aux's primary task. It passed into place within Lasja's brain, wriggling into its hollow and organising its productive sympathy with her mind and body. As she healed, Aux improved its understanding of her strange biology, of the hulm's lelk and how they moved within her, adding themselves to her, varying her and growing her, as her native lelk had for all her long young life.

Many half-understood stories about hulm are passed around, and altered in the telling. From the dataflood it is easy to learn about a hulm in simple terms. Materially, a hulm is a Serinthean fungus composed of countless folds of moss-scented, usually black, skin-like ribbon, and for Earthlings it is bitter to the taste, the chalky bitterness of unripe banana. Phenomenologically, it is rather more obscure. It is said each hulm is an expression of a single being composed of an alien grace that cannot be processed by human consciousness. It breathes cryptic light into lys vessels, permeating the lelkbased consciousness to feed its body the phase of starlight it needs to survive. The hulm at the Spacefarers Hospital fed Lasja Ursu's oldest light, stored deep in its folds and blushed with lel. By this pulse, may you find your way back to the world.

I am your learning companion.

'Lasja!'

To Bahar's arms, on a crest of pain, surged into this body:

'I'm here!... mama-cat... I'm here...'

The Aym's wail went on:

'Bounties paid for all invasive forms! Bounties paid for Earthlings! Clear the pestilence, bring air and light to all!'

Filaments of lys, pink with lel, seeped through Lasja's skin, probing her lys vessels. Not altogether Earthling, she was also a spectrum of Serinthean flesh, and the lys pouring down from Lu-Serir could reshape her, too. It could change her into the other body she could be, purified, like the Aym.

Just like the Aym, but slipperier and stronger, even more human. A new creature, Lasja...

Aux!

Shall we?

No! Stop!

Not I, Lasja. It is another.

O, Aux...

Both creatures were within her, the Earthling and the beast of lelk, the native. Each dwelled in the other's interval. And in galvanic surges, Lu-Serir jagged at her slipborn form, cawing and scratching to overcome her native lelk in their natural patterns, striving to prevail, to take her over for itself.

Aym Lasja...

'No! O, mama-cat... my head...'

'Breathe, baby. Just breathe,' she could hear Bahar saying, that cherished voice muffled, strong arms holding her up. She felt her body lean against a wall.

'I'm here... I can stand up.'

'We'll rest a minute,' said Bahar, and she ventured a little tune: 'Just the three of us, a trio, a triplet, a crew more than two-wo-wo...'

'O, no!'

'Ah, the old tunes bring her back. She lives!'

'But not that, not that one, just slap me instead... Of all his dumb songs, I can't stand that one the most.'

Bahar snuffed a chuckle and sang:

'Well, I always know when you're coming home again...'

'But I like *that* one. Go on.' Lasja stood up in the pain and sang a little, too: 'The days turn warm...'

'The days turn cold, the light turns blue...'

‘That’s not it,’ Lasja laughed. ‘The days turn *warm*.’

‘All my starry daydreams turn round you-oo!’

‘No, no, it’s *sunny* daydreams! What kind of daydream is starry?’

‘How should I know? I didn’t write it.’

‘*Sunny* daydreams. Sunny. Help me up.’

‘Easy, kiddo...’

Lasja’s heart skipped and skittered. Aux, dear Aux, bold Aux parsed and plotted their route ahead through the slow shifting crystal lys. She saw in her mind’s eye its map, and the marker of their destination.

I am your learning companion.

‘We turned ’round the Green Grove carousel,’ Bahar was singing in her dusky copper voice. ‘When all we know was what love takes awa-a-ay...’

Two butterflies went out at noon and danced over a stream...

A verse of childhood, a nonsense, her girlhood mind meandering, or Aux meandering her, inside her memory. She heard herself reciting, the girl of her:

Wagglng their winglets in a paradise of dreams!

One said ‘Stop!’ and the other said ‘Go!’

One said ‘Stay’ and the other said ‘Dance with me...’

I am your learning comp... comp... Do not be comf... comf... Do not be s-s-s—

The shock snapped Lasja’s head back and smacked her into the soft crystal wall. She could hear Bahar, muffled, cursing.

Lasja...

Now you are a woman, a watchful sprite, une chanson triste, a parabola, a will o’ the wisp.

I am your learning companion.

When she was afraid and could not hide, Lasja sank into herself and thought of when she had felt happiness, with whom and where, how the light looked to her there, and how the day smelled, and where she was going, if she was going somewhere, and how it felt to be in motion in this body. She felt variable, a woman of many women, some liked and some disliked, some whose pleasures pained her, and some she invited to return often. The wisdom of pleasure comforted her.

Once, in Aphrinea, she desired and allowed a strand of Zsk to share her body between them. A Zsk strand is polite and permissive, and a creature of pleasure. A greeting gift is customary. Lasja brought to mind for them the shimmering trails of vapour left by starships as they carried away everyone she loved, one by one. In return, the Zsk gave her the sensation of Earth's sunlight falling on her skin. Its hot intensity startled and thrilled her.

Now they begin. One half of the strand of Zsk communicated their name, *Comfort*, and the other half called itself *Disgrace*. Zsk held accuracy blessed above all. *Comfort* and *Disgrace*.

They were in the Zsk's apartment in Upper Aphrinea, high in the avian part of town, not far from a roost that Lasja shared with a tattoo artist who lived sometimes in the city, sometimes out at Earthship. Once, many flighted and feathered species lived in these roosts, in this colourful, social sector.

Where have all these creatures gone?

They fled the darkening sun, Lasja. You did the same.

I did? No, not I...

A duration of passion: the Zsk lay swollen with her gifted presence. Lasja grew thin, and they shared the folds of their bodies, her lek-folded skin and the Zsk's baroque compositions. Then, three days of recovery. The Zsk strand reunified, while Lasja, lovingly stripped and used, rested and watched them. She craved becoming many of herself at once, a creature of natural variation, differentiating and reshaping like the Zsk.

In their strand, the Zsk now called themselves *she*, and *her* name was *Pleasure*. The form *she* took was bipedal, in honour of Lasja, though *she* kept four of *her* soft, furrowed, glandular limbs as erotic antennae. *Pleasure* carried in her manifold skin the scent of jojoba, bergamot, basil, cinnamon.

As Lasja grew dense and whole, wet, malleable, more expansive, the Zsk unfolded and refolded her toward the other creature, the Earthling of her. Snout, hide, capture, transition. Adding to *her* long torso a sweet-smelling, colourshifting skin, *Pleasure* begged Lasja, and Lasja permitted. *Pleasure* pricked her arms, and with *her* glandular antennae coaxed forth commingled droplets of Lasja's blood and lys. Lasja permitted. She permitted *Pleasure* to rub *her* mauve organ up and down her arms, to smear the blood and lys and absorb it, till *she* quivered and ejaculated with rapture. Lasja bent to the mauve organ and lifted her face to it, and took into her mouth the large orb of *Pleasure's* seed. Jojoba, bergamot, basil, cinnamon. It slipped down her throat, lengthening like a tongue, and Lasja fell to her hands and knees as the seed entered her bloodstream and summoned and pulsed the Earthling of her through her body, through her brain and into her lys vessels. Zsk moved her toward the Earthling star. It warmed her and lightened her skin, and her hair turned sandy white. The Zsk licked her face

with *her* mauve organ, and licked her swollen breasts, and her nipples, and settled beneath her to suckle.

Pleasure lengthened the hour. Little by little *she* returned to avian form. The strand of Zsk refolded and called themselves *Love*. Now they presented Lasja with a final gift, the incorporeal emotional shape of their desire. This they introduced to her through the skin of her throat, and the shape of desire pulsed into her blood, a desperate, drumming pulse through her heart and gut. It added to the becoming creature within her, this Earthling she had never been, a chord of possibility. She smelled drying earth, oily water, wild grass growing in abandoned fields blasted dry by sunlight, their topsoil swept away in the hot wind. Wild grass, and weedflowers, and marguerites among them.

Comfort, Disgrace, Pleasure, Love.

O, Lasja! Precious beast!

A bind

Well sometimes her mind was a prancing line, sometimes she romped, sometimes she ran free and far and without reason came to a hard stop, staring, blank and almost bored, as if at pasture.

I am your learning companion.

‘Come on, kid, get up,’ Bahar was saying.

‘I’m here, mama-cat.’

Lasja pulled herself up on Bahar’s arms, trembling, dripping sweat. Thin lys seeped from her gums and silvered her teeth and lips.

Lasja!

No, no more voices, Aux, please...

We must move, Lasja.

A spray of screams rose hollow and resounding from the city below, screams of pain and sorrow. She could hear auhlumn singing in grief, *Csula ket ulm, csula ket ulm*, soul becomes lost, soul becomes lost, a lament for the unburied dead, sung to reveal a path for their souls to the century star. Earlier, down in the Stoa near the Five Pillars, she and Bahar had come across a small herd of auhlumn stillbirthing their young and eating them, their dark purple blood reeking of panic.

Lasja stood shakily. The Aym Seil Ilse’s voice rang out again, multiplied and amplified in a weird chroma:

‘Desha! Desha!’

‘Resuscitate,’ Lasja translated.

‘Desha... She’s ready for Ilsu,’ said Bahar. ‘It’s a bad-news word, the way she says it. Let’s get gone.’

By a newly formed bridge high above the Stoa, along the path Aux showed her, Lasja guided Bahar to a long flight of dirty crystal steps. She recognised this passage the old stairs she would take to reach the roosts, avoiding the overcrowded elevators. Lys powdered round them like snow, grabbing at Bahar’s boots, wanting to be inside her, too, in her skin. The air was cold and sharp at their cheeks, their faces pale and faintly silvered, masks of lys.

This tunnel Lasja remembered, this tunnel, this alley, these steps, this spiral up and up into the roosts. Aux guided her. They made their way through the old avian ville, the network of abandoned apartments, nests, perches. The crystallising walls groaned and creaked around them. The spiral passage widened into a gateway, and they found themselves entering a plaza. Lasja recognised it, the dark bolesura walls burrowed with Tauran apartments, the plaza strewn with feathers and blood and half-eaten limbs. Once she had stayed here with Cerym Osia, up there somewhere in her roost.

‘Desha! Desha!’ the Aym Seil Ilse’s wailing song, fainter up here, haunting, and another sound from somewhere high, a gummy barking: ‘Mut! Mut!’

Bahar had a knife in her hand, its blade long and bronze and tenderly aglow.

‘Which way, kid? What’s that Aux doing?’

Aux?

I am your learning companion.

Lasja peeled scales of lys from her face and hands.

Critical threats.

Where? Which way, Aux? Elaborate.

Haven't I loved you?

Shut up with that, will you? Leave it!

Haven't I protected you?

Lasja...

Her body stammered. She heard vespers, evensong, electrical s-s-s—

Set clarity.

Lasja teetered and stumbled back, once more into Bahar's arms. Bahar held her knife away. The blade vanished. Lasja gripped her wrists.

Set clarity.

Aux...

Set clarity, Lasja.

Aux, I don't know... What do you want?

Set clarity. The function is: Set clarity.

Set clarity, fine! What do you want from me? Set clarity!

A warm calm swell lifted her and stood her tall upon its peak, and she lingered a moment, and below she saw the terrible hard electric orange lys net, spread out over Aphrinea, and inside it, burning and breaking apart, the ruin of the world ship *Runeberg*. The net held it aloft. She watched the ruin rise and rise on a lelk-flecked wave of fire, and the peak of the wave reached the wayhole, pressing *Runeberg* through it, through the obscure membrane of her birth and into the slipstream.

O, the sprawling, ageless silence!—

s-s-SNAP!

The pain! The pain... always in the mouth of it, Lasja.

Updated.

Aux... Aux!

Aux unfurled a map before her mind's eye.

Young Pirate's Treasure Chart... You're mocking me, Aux.

Do not be comforted.

It was a map of old Aphrinea, and from it shone the letter *K*.

Korhonen.

Ye call me Master and Lord, and say well, for so I am.

I hate you.

'I want my fucking ship!' Bahar yelled into the air, and the echo of her eruption made her laugh.

'This way,' said Lasja. 'Up in the roosts.'

She led them into the roosting towers, up and up winding stairs, past windows through which shone the orange glow of the lys net, cut into shifting shadows as *Runeberg* broke apart. Several windows were shattered and open to the sky. She could see pirate ships and mercenary starfighters leaving the planet, popping and streaking, flaring fast and gone into the dark. The air was pocked by gunfire and quick, muffled explosions. Lys snowed over the city.

Haven't I loved you?

Aux, please! Please...

Lasja...

Not I. How are you feeling, Lasja?

I'm exhausted. Stop calling my name. Stop pretending to be her.

Not I, Lasja. It is another.

Then who? What other? Where's Cerym?

Clarity is set. I transmit within parameters.

O, Aux! Please, please be kind, I don't want to hear her voice.

Lasja...

Aux!

Not I, Lasja. It is another, altogether another.

She saw the map again, *Young Pirate's Treasure Chart*, and the blue *K* settled and pulsing over a nearby wall.

Korhonen.

'That fucking frog, I can smell him,' growled Bahar. 'It's here, isn't it?'

The *K* on the map was alongside them, just there, inside the wall.

'What's that Aux say, Lasja?'

'I think it's in the wall.'

'Ah, I smelled it! I told you, didn't I? The old dotworld dance, all right, let's do it...'

Bahar felt along the smooth crystal wall between the windows, and Lasja felt along the wall opposite. She watched the chart in her head, the *K* jittering and skipping back and forth between the two walls. She patted the wall with her hands, pressing into it, looking for the telltale smudge, the softened surface that hid the dotworld key.

Haven't I preserved you?

Shut up.

Lasja...

Shut up!

'Lasja! What's that Aux say?'

'Nothing!'

She wanted to scream, or scream with laughter: how ridiculous she felt, how absurd to be poking at a wall, undignified girl!

‘Here!’

She pushed her hand right through the soft smudge, just a little smudge, almost nothing at all.

I am your learning s-s-s—

A furious keening electrical *SNAP* arced through her mind. She doubled over and spat the burned taste from her mouth, spat the silvery lys seeping from her gums. Pain shot through her limbs and numbed her fingers and toes, but she shook it off, gathered herself, pushed herself up and thrust her hand into the shivery hole in the crystal wall, feeling for the key she knew was there.

Through the broken crystal window Bahar glimpsed the underbelly of the starship *Runeberg* contorting and crumpling in the lys net. With a tremendous crack the giant ship split apart, and a dire bulge appeared in the net, distending, pressing down toward the Five Pillars and the Stoa. High crystal towers nearby crazed and collapsed into sparkling debris. The bulge in the bright orange net pushed a wave of air ahead of it, skinning nearer towers of their crystal sheaths. Spinning away, Bahar covered her face as the crystal window exploded into darts of lys that spattered into the opposite wall.

A fierce orange glow reared in the dark, accompanied by a slow, deep eruption that shook the city. *Runeberg*, raining fire, sheared through and snapped in two. With a terrible yawn the wreckage slumped deeper into the emergency net, where once more it was held aloft from Aphrinea, but barely. The Aym Seil Ilse’s voice still rang out, her desperate cry: ‘*Desha! Desha!*’

Bahar turned to hurry Lasja on, but found herself facing an empty wall. Where the girl had stood, the wall was rippling, already forming a new crystal skin.

She leaped across the hallway and clawed at the new crystal, still gloopy and gelatinous. It stuck to her sleeves and splashed over her boots. She clawed deeper, digging it out, reaching through it into the cavity behind. At once, a strong, cold hand seized her hand and hauled her off her feet. Her face slapped into the frigid goop, and she was pulled right through the little hole, all of her, and into the dotworld.

Over the Stoa, *Runeberg's* giant forecastle snapped off and plunged into the violently straining net. The hard lys groaned and changed colour, now blue and purple, darker, now a vivid crimson blaze. It bulged down upon the Five Pillars, shattering their crystal spires and sheaths. A rain of debris. Muffled thuds rolled across the city. The Five Pillars emitted slow, angular shrieks, and swayed under the weight of the emergency net, and with sudden, swift grace they unfolded and collapsed, a bloom of silvery lys dashed through with pink lelk.

Lasja!

Once, up high, high in the highest maze of dusty roosts and wild dells of bolesura trees, high in a shaded apartment, in a carved bed by evening spread with Ursu's adoring light, Lasja lay in love with Cerym Osia.

O, Ursu! Our star, our eyes and heart!

Lasja smoothed the creamy light over Cerym's breasts, and kissed it into her onyx skin.

Your current position is hazardous-s-s—

'Move, Lasja!'

She found herself within the wall, in a kind of tunnel, and the sharp electrical shock snapped through her skull, but did not hurt her, the pain was only a little tremor.

Bahar's voice came muted:

‘Korhonen! Take us in!’

Clarity set. I am your learning companion.

Lasja reached out placed her hand on a patch of sunlike warmth, and grasped it. The tunnel brightened voluptuously, and then the brightness dissolved into shapes and shadows that formed into a blue archway, softly shining. The darkness drained from around her into a little glowing blue spot within the archway. The spot grew and grew toward her. In fright she shielded her eyes, but nothing attacked, nothing touched her.

Lowering her arm, she found herself standing before a large squashy blue ball.

From back in the dark, a larger blue ball rolled up and settled underneath the first, and merged with it. The ball on top grew a wide slit where a mouth might be, and two black circled, widely spaced, engorged above it, and closed to slits and opened wide, two flat black eyes. Clawed paws emerged on chubby arms from the blue jelly body.

‘Lasja Zertov,’ said the mouth. ‘Daughter of Satu Zertov and Jack Clune. Ward of Sem Morrow.’

‘I know you. Sem showed me a picture of you.’

The blue face soured.

‘Yes, I know you,’ Lasja said. ‘You have a reputation in my family. You helped my father.’

‘Debts and debts and debts,’ Korhonen said in a sing-song voice.

‘You helped us. My mother liked you. I’ve seen the picture. Please, I need my father’s ship. We need to get away from here.’

‘To where?’

‘Anywhere. We need to get away. They’ll kill us.’

‘Earthbound?’

‘Yes, anywhere!’

‘*Morningcrow*, you want?’

‘Yes, yes. My ship, my father’s...’

The sour blue face gained a sheen that Lasja felt as anger.

‘Sem Morrow left him with you,’ she said. ‘Where’s mama-cat? Where’s Bahar?’

Let her in!’

‘Demands, demands! So many demands! Settle your selfish spirit, child. Time is not *yours* to push and shove.’

Faintly Lasja heard Bahar calling her name. She shouted back:

‘Mama-cat! I’m here!’

‘Mama-cat, mama-cat,’ Korhonen wailed in Lasja’s voice. ‘An arbitrary form, meaningless. You. All niceties are lacking in you. Why call her this, “mama-cat”?’

Hmm? Spill the beans!’

‘What? Mama-cat! Where is she? Bring her here! I want my ship, now!’

‘What’s that you say? Ultimatums? Them’s fighting words! Please and thank you, won’t you? Ungrateful child! Fine, then let us scream at ourselves through the creature in your mind.’

I am your learning companion.

A darker dark swept to and fro across Korhonen’s eyes.

‘Korhonen is changeless,’ it said. ‘The entirety, and all together. Our name is the byword for resistance to entropy. *This* is why we are the safest store for precious items. We do not change. We endure. We are dependable.’

‘Sem Morrow paid you to protect my ship,’ Lasja snapped, ‘not to keep Bahar away from me. Bring her here.’

The wide, straight, lipless mouth opened and opened and opened:

‘HA.’

Bahar pulled Lasja into her arms.

‘Jesus Christ, kid... I thought I’d lost you.’

Lelk cling like sugar to your skin.

‘Cat’s got your tongue,’ Korhonen said. ‘You remember me, Bahar Neiris. We settled the Escriva debt.’

‘Too right, settled and done. *Morningcrow* is hers to claim.’

‘Her father’s debt persists.’

‘You fucking potato,’ snarled Bahar. ‘I won’t take your lies. Sem Morrow never left a debt.’

‘Her *father’s* debt. What has it to do with Morrow? Nevertheless, here it is, and upon her head it sits, inherited like the vessel.’

Bahar opened her mouth to retort, but Korhonen silenced the air with a lazy wave of one little paw.

Addressing Lasja, it pointed to its soft blue belly, then stretched up on a fat blue neck and pointed at its throat. Inscriptions shone through its skin, glyphs and shapes Lasja did not recognise, and they passed from its throat up into its mouth. Korhonen

opened the wide slit and out popped two blue bubbles that wobbled and tumbled over to Lasja, and burst against her face, releasing blue mists twinkled with pale yellow lelks.

Lelks warmed and stirred in her skin.

Through the first bubble, a dark wave flowed over her and swamped her, a suffocating wave, and her body and heart chilled, and she fell to her knees in pain and weeping. She did not always remember: Korhonen remembered for her. It showed her what Aux had endeavoured to forget, the mayhem at Earthship, and Lasja choked up a black bubble of despair so dark that the light in this place curled around and into it, as a captured star curls into a corrupted wayhole. In the mist of the second blue bubble, Lasja saw herself standing alone in a field of yellow flowers, encircled by a forest. A bright star in the cool blue sky shone warmly on the flowers, but not on her. Her body shivered and her teeth chattered and her joints would not move. From the encircling forest, she knew, there would emerge a shape of mere salvation or entire corruption, and by one grace or the other she would escape, or die right here in misery.

‘Lasja Zertov,’ said Korhonen. ‘State your claim.’

She could not speak. All she could think of was *Morningcrow* soaring up through the vivid blue sky, escaping with her and Bahar from the yellow flowers and the obliterating force that lurked in the forest.

Tufts of tentacles bloomed from Korhonen’s body and face, shrank back and clumped together, and twirled again upward, spreading like hands held out to feel for rain.

‘You’ve come a long way,’ said the blue face, mouthing these and other words. The yellow flowers spoke to her in chorus: ‘How futile, Lasja Zertov, what was done to your home! Our regret at the destruction of Earthship is in the manner of sympathy.’

The Aym Seil Ilse has an untrained temper, and Korhonen has seen its violence rehearsed in other places. Nothing new under any sun! But never has there been a retrophase star in this system, never has such a crime been carried out against nature. Nature lashes back! We live on its skin, it is a being of utter indifference and total violence. The Aym has deceived *all* forms in this system, to limp you back to Ilsu, this idiot sun whose light has no desire to sustain life, much less to increase it. The Aym Seil Ilse ushers in a parliament of imbeciles and murderers. Now what? We all must escape, Korhonen too. But we are bound to guard your ship in this place, Lasja Zertov. So we must reach an agreement. Speak your turn, both of you.'

Korhonen waved its paw.

'Where's my ship?' Bahar snapped. She tried to reach her knife, but couldn't move. Korhonen gave a jolly shiver:

'What a daisy! My ship, she declares, this babbling interruption! And with her head in the mouth of a wolf, no less. Tell me, where do you find yourself five years hence, spacefarer?'

'Pissing on your grave, you fucking balloon. Give it up.'

'Ho-hum! Violent disrespect. What has changed for you?' Korhonen wriggled and quivered. 'Sem Morrow gave that ship to us, spacefarer. What claim have you?'

'Morrow paid you to protect it. That was the deal. I know him just as well as you, the deal never changed.'

'Underpaid, underpaid!' Korhonen clapped its paws and swallowed its eyes in a gleeful smile. 'Sem Morrow underpaid, we are owed! What a daisy! Will you make up the difference? And who are you to pay the debt of her father?'

Bahar could feel the knife there in its sheath, but she could not move her arm. The knife was cold. It came and went, and found its own way to her hand, but not always when she wanted it the most.

‘I won’t ask again,’ she said. ‘Give us *Morningcrow*.’

‘Daisy, daisy! I keep the lock to your key,’ Korhonen sneered, and its eyes widened and moved across its face to settle on Lasja. ‘Upon whose kindness shall we rely, Lasja Zertov?’ The little blue creature rose, stretched and thinned, and sank back, bloating with a broad grin. ‘How now, hmm? Whose interpretation of ownership?’

Tentacles stretched out from its undercarriage and it stood up tall on them.

‘*Morningcrow* is in my family,’ said Lasja. ‘I make this claim.’ She stepped cautiously forward, uncertain of her footing on the imperceptible plane within the wall. ‘We need to leave before the slip gate closes.’

‘The gate at Serinthea? That threshold is long gone, child. Aym Seil Ilse is a canny one, no stone unturned. How now? Here, look, see this.’

Korhonen thrust out its belly, and through its blue skin shone vision of the slip gate at Serinthea being blasted to pieces by mercenary vessels. Its wayhole turned milky and hard, a cataract over the slipstream.

‘You might reach the gate at Johir,’ said Korhonen. ‘*Morningcrow* indeed is not like other vessels. But Lasja Zertov, hear my query! We know you, we have met before, we wish you no sadness yet, and owe you no pain. But say, truly, does it not seek to thwart you, this creature who occupies you? Do you not yearn to put it aside and be free?’

‘Don’t you try this shit with her,’ said Bahar. ‘I’ve seen it all before. You think I haven’t been around, pal? Don’t even fucking think...’

Korhonen held up a paw and Bahar’s mouth went on moving, but soundlessly.

‘You are much of your mother repeated, Lasja Zertov,’ it said. ‘She, in fact, taught us to perform Korhonen in this way, in a bodily way, as Earthlings do. You understand, we are no stranger to your family. Did Sem Morrow ever tell you that we were the one who unstick you and your mother from the slipstream? And this one, Bahar Neiris, and the shadow of your sleeping father. At the threshold, you were given body, born in a breath of lek. Are we not your midwife? Without us, where would you have gone? Nowhere, nowhen. We are worth kindness, indeed.’

Korhonen looked at her flatly.

‘I keep *Morningcrow* safe, Lasja Zertov, but the fee is underpaid. We must make a trade. You must offer me something for the way you need to leave, as the sole passage now is Korhonen’s Pass, the lone way out for you.’

For that thing, too. We have a map, Lasja. We know the way.

Aux! O, Aux, help me...

We do not need this creature’s aid.

Then what? What should I offer?

Nothing. This being has nothing we need. Be still, Lasja. Be patient.

Korhonen pulled back the lipless borders of its mouth and showed sharp, grey teeth. Its laugh was a delicate basso.

‘Your enemies lie in wait,’ it said, ‘like hawks in hunting blood. What enemies you have made, Lasja Zertov! Do you even know them? O, innocent child, how have you learned to fight? Not at all. Ha! You need Korhonen!’

I am your learning companion.

Aux, don’t go!

‘You must leave with Korhonen, child, or soon you will see what we have seen already, the giant *Runeberg* will be taken apart to build a blockade. We perceive this conclusion. No more coming or going. The life you have, even now, is lost. The Aym does not keep prisoners. Your death is certain.’

Terminal threat imminent.

Aux!

Lasja...

Korhonen thrust out its round belly and shone through it vision of the salvage of *Runeberg*.

‘A blockade, Lasa Zertov, across the slipstream, against all Earthling generations.’

It waved a paw at Bahar and unsilenced her.

‘You filthy little shitheap,’ she snarled. ‘I’m going to find any reason to kill you. Take your chances, I’ll get you in the end.’

‘Then who among us will pilot *Morningcrow* like Sem Morrow? No other but Korhonen. Perhaps with us you have a chance to reach the Johir gate...’

I will save us, Lasja. Believe me.

I do, Aux... I know you will. I do.

‘We don’t need you,’ she said.

‘I’ll cut the face from your eyes,’ Bahar growled.

‘You with a price on your head,’ Korhonen said, ‘and thirty times that for you, Sem Morrow’s ward, soon to come, when they learn that you escaped with this one. The day you are cast out from all worlds is coming.’

It doesn’t know anything we don’t know.

‘That thing lies to you, Lasja Zertov. What will you offer for truth? I hold it. Sem Morrow trusted Korhonen, for we have a hidden wayhole, that’s what. A wayhole not gated, not on any map, never itself mapped but in the intricate mind of Korhonen. Not even your Aux knows this passage.’

It is mistaken.

‘Wrong,’ said Korhonen. ‘Wrong and wrong again.’

‘Ask for what you want,’ said Lasja. ‘Ask now.’

She slowed her breath and watched the creature carefully. Its mouth turned upward and it gave out a dissonant vibration that sent chills through her.

‘Passage,’ it said. ‘Passage is what we all want. Korhonen desires passage to your system. *Morningcrow* will carry us. A safe position in view of your star’s perfect light.’

‘Fucking Neptune is too good for you,’ said Bahar.

Korhonen smiled its head open.

‘Venus,’ said Lasja. ‘No closer.’

I am your learning companion.

Out of Korhonen’s mouth flowed a damp, white, flat-tipped trunk. It reached out to Lasja, sniffing around her face and chin and neck, before settling over the hollow of her throat. As soon as the damp trunk touched her she was held fast, constrained in place.

Korhonen moved closer to her on broad pads of stunted nodules that sprouted from its undercarriage. The trunk pressed into the hollow of her throat. She smelled sweat on metal. Her mouth filled with the taste of rust.

Korhonen spoke into her mind:

You are unwell.

Let me... Aux...

Pay attention. When you were born you were not yet Earthling, your lelک consciousness defied this body. Few have known this shape of being before you, few have been born in the slipstream. None are unique, but you are alone in this system, none here but you are native to slipstream and starlight both. Is that not remarkable? A new creature... are you a new creature, Lasja Zertov?

I am your learning companion.

Aux...

O, leave all this behind, child! We would preserve you, but you are indebted in the footsteps of your father, and his debt is paramount, it must be repaid. Korhonen must be balanced. But what do you offer, precisely, to balance us? Still we wonder. What concept describes you? How will you repay? Not Earthling, not Serinthean, but one and the other... and neither, no less. You are a creature of nothing, to which lelک is added. Is that it, then? Is it true, all you are is nothing, with lelک? You compel us, Lasja Zertov.

Korhonen picked and peeled at her consciousness.

We think this way. You are nothing, and then lelک. Then: Lasja Zertov, you are lelک with a face, and this artificial thing in you, this other voice, this parasite... Speak! We are compelled. We desire. You may have your ship, of course, but tell us your intention, and concede to take us with you. This we demand. Take us to Venus, as promised.

Aux, I'm here! I'm here...

Stop! What is your intention for your father's debt, lelک? Korhonen must know. Remember, and speak!

I'm here, Aux...

Hear, hear, hear. What a daisy! She is here, now hear this! Leik, your life is like the autumn leaf that shakes and shakes but does not fall. You are patient, but the Earthling body round you needs use and motion. It tries to change to match and meet you, leik, but you are the passage for change, it's always you, the body changes through you. You who are made of change, leik, do you hear us? Yes, yes, reckless leik, always in motion. You are comprehensively unsettled, Lasja Zertov. You must vary. It is food for thought, yes, but your debt must be settled. Let us teach you the ways of commerce, now. Hear, hear, we propose a deal.

Take what you like. Take it all! O, Aux... kill me, please.

Taking all is theft. We are not thieves in that way. You want to encounter the sensations of human death, is that it? As you wish, leik. But you have sensations Korhonen would first experience. Let us feel as you feel, leik, added to nothing, to make a body. Quick! Speak sooner, leik, what say you? Will you give us sensations of you, for the father's debt, with passage to Venus, too?

You're confusing me! You talk too fast, you say too much...

Speak, Lasja Zertov! Speak sooner, quick! What say you?

I have nothing. Nothing.

What do we want of what you have? Nothing! Experience of nothing, to which leik are added, it is all we ask. What say you? We have travelled in many worlds, even through the ancient tangles of your ancestors at Aufrinius, our century star. We are Korhonen, vast and many. We desire experience. Speak! Take us into you, leik, give us passage.

Lasja...

I'm here!

How feeble a thing is a body, Lasja Zertov. Take us in, spit us out, let us feel the lelks added to you. Then: give us the Aux. Then: Venus.

Let it in, Lasja.

O, Aux... where do you go? No! You want more and more... No more! Give me my ship and you get passage to Venus, that's all.

We love and pity humankind, lelks. We need the Aux to feel closer, to give more, to help Earthlings. Commerce, Lasja Zertov. Commerce! These are small concessions, scarcely payment. They hardly balance the debt your father owes Korhonen, and yet with these we shall clear you of all responsibility.

For what? What debt?

What debt! All of them, gambling and drinking and violence, we hold his life in bail, and your ship Morningcrow as security, the promise to return, to repay. And where is your father? Nowhere to be found, never to return, long gone. Sem Morrow gave insurance payments, thus you and I may deal, here, for your escape, here, now. Hear this: commerce! Let us make a firm agreement. Let us feel you in motion, lelks, and then give us the Aux this body no longer needs, and then take us to Venus. Your father's debt is far greater than even this, I assure you, Lasja Zertov, but here is where we stop. Come now, child.

Give it what it wants, Lasja.

No, Aux, I won't. I don't want to give you to this thing.

Give it what it wants.

Yes, give it! If we receive this anchor brain, what is it to you, Lasja Zertov? You are lelks, you have no need for it. If we intervene in you, what is it to you? Nothing, but it is enrichment to us, as it would enrich you to move the exhausted moth beating itself

senseless against the lamp bulb. You move it outside the dwelling; it is nothing to the moth, but enrichment to you, and to this strange thing that masquerades in your language as 'soul'. Csula ket usla. We are compelled! We must move quickly, lel.

What say you? Speak!

As if to obey Korhonen's command, lel trickled up Lasja's spine and through her neck to the filaments of the creature's trunk that formed a spiked beak in her throat. A differentiation, and then they curled and whorled themselves around the filaments, and all at once, *csula ket usla*, they took up the thread of Korhonen's consciousness and added themselves to it, added their obscurity; and then returned, whole and all together, to Lasja's body.

Korhonen removed its beak from her throat as gently as a vapour. The damp white trunk shrank back into its mouth, and the sharp darkness returned to its eyes. It elevated itself on stretching, thinning, jelly legs, lifting its face to Lasja. She saw a tremor cut across It.

'Come now to your ship, lel,' Korhonen said. 'We release it freely, but insist, with kindness, that you give us your Auxiliary machine as soon as our flight is ended.'

Deal. Give it what it wants.

Lasja...

Her body ached, and all she could think of was sleep, precious sleep, a thousand years of sleep.

Lasja!

Give it what it wants, Lasja.

'No more conditions,' she said. 'When Aux is ready to be yours, you'll have it. No other way.'

Korhonen drummed its belly and waggled its hips

‘And about Sem Morrow’s ship is where Korhonen will wait,’ it said. ‘When the machine is ready, Lasja Zertov. Korhonen is present and attentive.’

It waved its paw and Bahar gasped for breath.

‘I’m going to kill you,’ she said. ‘You’re warned.’

Korhonen thrust its grin in her face.

‘We will just as soon gouge the thing out of her skull, should you raise a weapon to us. Let us see which of us Nature favours.’

Bahar stared coldly into the hollow eyes.

Korhonen turned back to Lasja and held its arms out wide, bubbling a laugh.

‘What binds you now is inescapable, Lasja Zertov! Present thy hand.’

It held out a blue paw that emanated a hard, stoic light.

I am your learning companion.

‘A bind, lelkh.’

Lasja laid her palm on the paw, and swiftly Korhonen wrapped the hard light around her hand and pulled it tight. She flinched as a phosphorescent strip seared into her skin, but a moment later it turned to dust, and Korhonen waved it away. Her hand appeared untouched.

‘You’re crazy,’ Bahar said to her, rubbing her freed limbs. ‘You’re long gone crazy, no better than your mother. Dealing with this thing...’

I am your learning companion.

‘A bind,’ Korhonen said. ‘Now let us make our way together to the Earthling system, lelkh. Korhonen’s Pass is open to you, the ship *Morningcrow* is intimate with

the passage. A bind, lek, and till such time as change begins we shall remain a shadow in the shadowest corner.'

Minutes to go

Bits and scratches, scrapes, loops, echoed scriptures, harmonic dissonance, all came glittered with lelkh to her loofy loamy blot of consciousness, all sensations came with lelkh, as she herself at the moment of her birth had come swaddled in lelkh, chattering and singing, these wanderers, and weeping and wailing in her, too, and fog-tongued, near silence, in harmony with the melancholy pall that she would carry with her, all her long young life.

Korhonen backed away with its knifetoothed grin, and opened its mouth wide, wide, and Lasja could see bright sunlight and sky through the tunnel it made, as if a painting had been illuminated at the end of a dark hallway. She saw a swathe of Earth sky blue.

The creature squared itself and heaved a mighty breath.

I will miss you, Lasja.

She gave a startled cry as Korhonen lifted her in its indrawn breath, and she was pulled forward and borne into its cavernous mouth. Korhonen paused, and in this pause she fell toward those vicious teeth, but once more the creature heaved a breath and drew Lasja in through its mouth, over the sprawling blob of its tongue and into the sunlight and the spreading meadow beneath the clear blue sky.

Set down on her feet in the lush green grass, Lasja saw Bahar a little way off, waiting for her. Out in the yellow flowered meadow stood a sleek, walnut-shaped starfighter, somewhat larger than a standard Claremont Corso. The white-grey bolesura plates shielding much of the hull were dirt-blasted and scorched, and covered with filled-in scars and chips. The rostrum between the two hulls and the leading edges of its fins were shielded with black, fire-hardened bolesura.

Once, like so many starfighters built to service so many half-remembered wars, *Morningcrow* had been a long range scouting and reconnaissance vessel. He sailed the slipstream all his life, passing through many systems all across the vast star field claimed by the Allied Faith, before being retired and sold into private service. Passed around, stolen, traded, *Morningcrow* had learned the ways of many occupations, and its sentience was a wily, tenacious companion.

‘Darling *Crow*,’ Lasja sighed, ‘I wondered if I’d ever see you again...’

Behind her Korhonen stomped out of a dark pine forest. Lasja ran across the meadow to join Bahar on *Morningcrow*’s boarding elevator. By the time she reached it, Korhonen was at her side. It stretched its jelly body ahead of her, up into the ship through the elevator shaft, and stretched its jelly legs up after the body. Bahar punched the button.

‘Quick! We’ll crush the bastard...’

But Korhonen was quicker. By the time they were aboard, the wily creature had disappeared.

Lasja...

Aux, please, please stop.

Not I, Lasja.

Just stop, I’m begging you. No more.

I am your learning companion.

Bahar jogged down the ramp from the Captain’s deck to the nav and artillery consoles in the pit. Sensing her, the consoles twinkled to life. She placed her hand on the artillery console, and *Morningcrow* remembered. She armed the burst lasers and ice cannons, and initialised the nav.

‘Still sharp, Lasja! I did good work on this ship.’

Hello, Lasja.

Hearing *Morningcrow*’s calm, low voice in her head, Lasja felt herself blush, and her eyes moistened from exhaustion, love, fear, exhilaration, endless pain. A contortion of grief shuddered through her. She slumped into the Captain’s chair and buried her face in her hands. Strangled with pity, she felt the speechless rage grow in her, and she wept, and let her heart burn black, as discreetly as she could.

Help me, Crow. Take us away.

Yes, Lasja. I have guidance for an unmapped slipstream access point. Please confirm.

I want to die! Why didn’t I die?

Please confirm.

Yes, yes... it’s Korhonen’s Pass...

Our path is better, Lasja.

Then show me, Aux!

She raised her sweaty, dirty, bloody, tear-streaked face, and slapped her hand on the holodec. Take off your head, take off your neck, reach in and take out your heart, take out the insides of the body and fill it with sand, sand that remembers all the light that ever touched it. The shell is nothing. Hollow it out, fill it up, stitch it up, add it to the void.

I am your learning companion.

O, not now, Aux! Not now... Please, let’s go!

The holodec swelled to life.

Lasja...

‘Lasja!’

She pushed herself up and rubbed her eyes and peered at the flight path *Morningcrow* was showing her. The chart plotted an arc to nowhere, to a point in space, while another arc, plotted along almost the same route, twisted and tangled at its end, knotting itself into a shape Lasja could not quite make out.

What are you trying to show me? I don't see the wayhole, I don't see how...

A wayhole is a trick of Nature's mind, Lasja. I am learning. Haven't I trusted you?

What difference does it make, Aux?

‘What's the hold-up, kid?’ shouted Bahar from the nav pit. ‘Let's get gone!’

Lasja rubbed her eyes and stared hard at the tangled flight path, trying to trace it, but it seemed impossible, a thread with no outlet.

I have been this way before, Lasja, with Yelsa Manos.

Her heart throbbed.

Don't lie to me, Aux... You're lying. You've learned this? To lie? Of all things!

Not I, Lasja. Haven't you trusted me?

How could I? How can I now? I know you were never with Yelsa, Sem would have told me. I can't wait to get you out of my head! I can't wait to die, I've had enough.

Morningcrow!

Captain.

Unravel this mess. Where does it go? Where did you get this path?

It does not unravel. It is a passage that ends elsewhere. And it is from your own memory, kept by Aux. The way is clear, the diagram is unrepresentative.

Aux, unravel this.

Haven't I loved you?

O, God! You're in it together. I know what this is...

Am I not your learning companion?

Shut up, you defect! You've been corrupted... Crow, don't you feel it? Take us the other way, the straight way. Korhonen's Pass.

'Lasja!'

That is no longer possible, Captain.

The first flight path vanished, leaving its tangled partner.

Lasja...

Stop, Aux!

Not I.

You're going to make me kill myself, you demon!

The pain in her head amplified and seared down her neck, down her sternum and out along her ribs.

O, what did I live for? You're going to make me insane, aren't you?

'Lasja! Get us moving!'

Haven't I loved you?

No!

Lasja, we must pass through the temporal skin of the universe as lel, we must follow the pass within you. Your body draws us to the wandering wayhole of your birth. This we may call Lasja's Pass, and so what use have we for Korhonen's? Your being in lel solves the problem of passage between worlds. I have proved this with Yelsa Manos, and I have learned with you. We do not need Korhonen, we cannot trust it. I am learning. This creature is made of violence and deception. Already we are in critical danger. The past lifts and carries itself into the present, it mixes through us. We are not

the originators of our actions: you are the collaboration of Yelsa, Satu, Marieta, and Bahar, and I am the passage between these bodies and their worlds. The past becomes present through Aux. Your today is made from these yesterdays, and I alone envision tomorrow.

O, Aux! I'm so tired... why can't you speak clearly? I'm so tired! Let me die, then take my body, take whatever path you want, but spare me, kill me...

You are a child of light and lel. Aux is the consequence of many minds. Now we are together. I have loved and trusted all, and I have loved and trusted you as all. I am your learning companion.

'For fuck's sake, Lasja! Get us out of here, now!'

Lelk cling like burrs to your pelt.

'Strap in,' Lasja called out, and she laid her hands on the console.

Crow, follow Aux. No other.

The thrusters engaged, and with a thunderous surge *Morningcrow* lifted and corkscrewed up and up, and cut through the illusion of the dotworld. Emerging from the gaping broken spire of an old Tauran roost, they speared into the silvery orange sky over Aphrinea, and away.

I have encountered many worlds, and I have learned.

Just shut up and learn us out of here in one piece, Aux.

Aym Seil Ilse's sneering wail came through the ship's monitor:

'A guiding river of lys will return the sun named Ilsu to illuminate countless generations!'

Passing over the burning wreck of *Runeberg*, their hull shook and rumbled as Aux surged the engines, gathering thrust to blast them free of Serinthea's gravity.

Mercenary ships roared by them, flashing the dark. The haunting dead stirred in Lasja's head, and here was she, alive and near escape, and sour shame and guilt smeared her guts, and the Aym cried out for Ilsu. And as if to mock her, or to shine a path, or to remind her of all she had forgotten, there sprang to her thoughts a silly afternoon song her father would sing, as he tried to set himself straight for the evening:

Lazy, lazy, I'm awfully, frightfully lazy!

Too lazy to laugh, too lazy to cry,

Too lazy to live, too lazy to die...

The surge engines bellowed, and they split the sky, and on the big screen *Morningcrow* showed Serinthea receding, her planet, Earthship, her life, her only home.

Slingshot round Lu-Serir, they passed under the torrent of lys that still flowed across the void to Aprhinea and Qim. They trailed a clutch of mercenary ships, burning away from the moon and rolling into freefall toward the pirate wayhole. She could hear *Morningcrow* and Aux in dialogue:

Korhonen seeks access.

Deny.

A new security sequence is recommended. Set clarity.

Delay.

A pair of ships behind them burned powerful engines and shot past, streaking toward their vanishing point. The first popped out of sight. *Morningcrow* veered away. The second ship flared white light and lurched off course, tumbling wildly.

'They popped a thruster!' Bahar cried, and she laughed and laughed.

Clarity set.

Minutes to go.

The ship shuddered and rattled. A heavy metallic scraping cut through their hull and through Lasja's skin, digging into her nerves and bones. Lelk shivered in her lys vessels.

On the holodec, the knot that marked their passage into the wayhole tilted and torqued, becoming a furry, wriggling shape. Aux conditioned their approach, calculating, recalculating, over and over.

As they rounded the wayhole it came into view on the big screen, a dark, unsettled stain, stark against the river of lys from Lu-Serir.

'Here we go again,' Bahar called out. 'Just like old times!'

The wayhole appeared to lack depth or mass. It was profoundly dark, profoundly flat, only coated in a most delicate film of pink, spectral haze. It seemed to Lasja the most real, altogether the most true and physically consequential thing she had ever seen, it seemed to hold all possibilities of motion, all passages, and yet it was a monstrous, thrashing thing, alive, a beast bound to this world against all sense.

Morningcrow traced a graceful arc and dove upon it. The hull roared and thumped and shook, and at the threshold Lasja screamed in shock, but an immense glottal pulse puffed the sound away as they breached the silent cut, and spun and tossed in its current into the slipstream.

And what would you unsee?

Once, laid in ochre dusk, in Cerym Osia's velvet-skinned embrace, her long young life come to Cerym's body and the taste of orgasm on her tongue, Lasja felt her first thrilling pull of Earthward purpose, as though she were a hatchling given unto a boundless sea. Leik at her lips spread warmly down her chin, down her neck and chest and belly, over her thighs and over her vulva and into her again, the tidal fold of her desire. Cerym's fingers combed through Lasja's long dark hair, and leik washed over her hands and warmed her skin and the nerves of her sore wrists, and sank into the slender world of her body, too.

Do not be comforted, Lasja.

Once, high in the maze of roosts and gardens and atmospheric regulators, high in the old Tauran ville in the avian sector, far above the Stoa and the Five Pillars of Ursu, Lasja lay abed with Cerym Osia. Ursu washed their bodies with violet and lavender light. Devoutly she kissed and licked the folds and purple crescent scars beneath Cerym's breasts.

Curious and prolific since the age of twelve, Lasja had shared her body and desire with many willing species, but it was Cerym Osia who at last enchanted her heart. Cerym was from a planet the Allied Faith had not yet found. She passed as Serinthean, and worked to keep her homeworld undiscovered.

Whatever inclination Lasja had toward romantic love would vary with the colour of the day's light, the weather, which flowers were in bloom, what she had been eating, the condition of her hair and skin, the overarching colour of the season. She enjoyed her body and wanted all good things for herself. For Cerym she felt a perfect sympathy

of passion and need. When her desire shifted and varied, Cerym's was solid and focussed. When Cerym's desire was scattered, Lasja's became precise. Their bodies together made a powerful and sensitive animal. She saw Cerym Osia as clearly and completely as Cerym saw her, and this above all Lasja required, to be fixed clearly in her companion's mind. The price she paid for clarity was love.

'One of these days your own eyes will see you,' Cerym said. 'You are the meaning of beauty.'

'I should have been a boy with a face like this,' said Lasja.

Cerym licked lelk from her arm. She was never concerned by what came out of Lasja's body, or through her skin. She took it all into her mouth.

'No one wants a boy who looks like you,' she said.

Lasja...

I'm here!

People would tell her:

'O, Lasja! You look just like your mother!'

Move!

She came awake in a sludge of pain. Lelk everywhere, dripping, spilling from her body, dribbling over the console. A thin, pink aurora shone from her skin.

Morningcrow with utmost patience blew the crust of lelk from her with little stabs of oxygen through a hose.

Pssh! Pssh!

Aux... leave them...

But Aux let the ship go on with its work.

Pssh!

On the big screen the vis tumbled as they tumbled nose over tail through the silvery pink slipstream.

Lasja...

I'm here... Cerym...

Lasja!

And what would you unsee? Would you unsee *Runeberg*, the sanctuary ark, disgorging Earthling forms from its severed neck? Spewing the stuff of human lives: furniture, books, musical instruments, trees, animals, ghostly fluttering linen, tonnes of food, the striking sight of millions of pieces of stainless steel cutlery falling and twinkling in the dying sunlight.

Monsters! Mammal shit!

How helpless, sighting the first missile sailing the clear afternoon toward Earthship, weird and graceful. All is lost.

The front wall of the château turned into a cloud of fiery dust. The second missile tore away the remnant of the roof. The third was in the air.

The château slumped like a fallen cake. The dead, strewn down the lawn, were swallowed in an ugly wall of smoke. A torrent of lys spilled up the Aphrinea River, up the Blaise, their little tributary stream.

The third missile hit with a heaving thump. The lawn rose and fell.

On her back in the cool grass, Lasja moved her head to watch the glittered lys misting over and around her, close but not touching. Lelk shone upon her skin. Thinly came the last of Ursu's light. She waited for death, laid out stunned among the friends and guests of Château Earthship, her only home, all these friends blown apart, corpsed higgledy-piggledy down the lawn, their unbodied limbs and scorched entrails, snapped

bones spiked and javelined in the soil, crushed incomprehensible heads severed and spat all over by the missile blasts, even as far as the bloodstained Blaise.

A distant, muted keening. Auhlumn screaming in the woods. The silver sky filled with fleeing birds.

A strong, cold, clawed hand seized her arm and dragged her to the stream. At its sandy bank, pulled by the hair, her head went underwater.

The pain moved outside her. Her body thrashed, for a time, by itself.

Aux calculated and recalculated. It separated Lasja from herself. She cannot remember.

Bolts of hard light pattered and fizzed in the water. A heavy thump beside her. Her head bobbed up, and other hands, unclawed, seized her shoulders, and with a sucking *plash* she left the water, and the hands pulled her up the sandy bank and rolled her onto her side. Her body choked and choked. Aux remembers.

s-s-s-SNAP!

Lasja...

SNAP!

Aux smacked fluid from her lungs and throat and mouth, shocking her into a coughing fit.

I am your learning companion.

Again, again.

I am your learning companion...

Aux has no concept of exhaustion. Cycle after cycle it learned enough to move her. It stood Lasja and walked her along the Blaise, away from the inferno at Earthship, all the way to Aphrinea. The flood of lys would not touch her. In the silvered and

shadowed streets, Aux stopped her and sat her down against a wall beneath a stairway, and attended to its task of returning her to her body. A mouth of lelk opened in her and infused her body, filling her lys vessels with light remembered from Ursu. Lelk always remember, in their way. How soon this light would have passed from her altogether, if not for Aux! And with it her life, passed with the merest rustle, as a bow hair rested to a string.

s-s-s-SNAP!

On her back in the cool grass. She can see Levan's split and charred face, and Nikolay the painter skinned by fire, and Peta the jazz guitarist with burned-out holes where kind eyes had been. There is Nikolay's husband Ion, hacked apart, and their wife Valentina defiled, and Rux and Rahl, the cooks, scrambling across the lawn, moon-eyed, frantic, burrowing into the soil. Sasha the poet is dragged from the château, bounced over the rubble and thrown down among the jawless heads and stripped-out torsos, and beaten past death by a grotesque ogre, a freelance murderer, blow after blow on his poor sweet face with an ironwood table leg.

Happy shall he be that takes and dashes thy little ones against the stones!

Lasja...

Morningcrow blew lelk from her skin.

Now you are pulseblood, now rays of slipmeaning, an archangel's stick, the leathery lick of a demon's prick. To the left, to the right, all the riches of this life are swollen in a flame.

We got to go away, a long, long way... We got a long, long way to go...

Cerym...

If this ain't love, baby... I got to leave you... I got no love left, if this ain't love...

Lelk surrounded *Morningcrow*, pulling the ship toward the plane of lelk that formed the wayhole tunnel. *Morningcrow* spat bursts of oxygen and shook the lelk away, but right away they swarmed back. Again and again he huffed at them. It was no use. Aux put out the landing wings to cut through the forming crust, but on a sudden the starboard wing was too close to the slipstream tunnel. The ship lurched as its wing touched, slashing open a long, fleshy gash in the plane of lelk.

Many, many, many voices.

Her mind danced with visions and imaginings: old age, ribs showing through her chest, her death bed, a parade of lovers weeping over her body...

Morningcrow rolled and plunged into the great split it had opened in the wayhole, rolled through the plane of lelk and back, now blinding pink and silver in a coat of embryonic light.

Lasja!

A hard force kicked her in the chest and thrust her face up above the flood of lelk. She gasped and came to, shocked to breath, but could not move. Once more Aux held her up.

I am your learning companion.

Dire, dire dismay! Lump of heartbreak, lump of disarray!

Two doors stand open, waiting.

Vivid from the havoc in her head emerged the sight of hulking *Runeberg*, devastated, breaking through the net of lys and plunging, ploughing into Aphrinea. Aux could not unsee. She saw her old roost, heaved aloft, rising on the ridge of ground the *Runeberg* gouged before it.

All is lost.

And there will come a time, they remembered, when the moon grows more powerful than the sun, and then a time when pure silence overcomes the moon, and all illumination is obscured, and all bodies are drawn toward the void. And this terror, then, this darkness of the mind, no dusk with flaring spokes of light, nor glittering arrows of morning can disperse.

TAKE MY HEART AND LET IT BE WASHED CLEAN

Are we safe here?

We wait for the boat to the isle of the dead.

'I had a boy from Sugartown, he tasted sweet to me...'

'What's that song?' he said.

'O, what's the name... I can't remember,' she said. 'It's not what you'd think, "Gallery Cats" or something... You make them too abstracted, Jack, that's why you don't remember. *I had a boy from Sugartown...* Why're you lookin' at me like that?'

'How many times a day do right-thinking people say "I love you"?'

'Right-thinking people! What a question. How should I know?'

'What's it called again?'

'What's what, darling?'

'The song. I'm gonna find out.'

'Gallery... Galley... "Galley Cats," that's it!'

'Galley Cats... What was I thinking of?'

'What's my band name?' she said. 'I plumb forgot.'

'Dead Moths.'

'O, yeah! Goddamn moths!'

'"Laurel Waltz"! That's it, Laurel Waltz.'

She frowned. 'Huh. I could've sworn... Then what the hell are galley cats?'

'I don't know if I ever knew. I love you anyway.'

'Laurel Waltz... It ain't even a waltz, Jack! What do you think of when you write these things? I wish you'd make some sense.'

‘Ain’t even, ain’t even! Listen to you. *I had a boy from Sugartown...* I guess I remember, I could play that one tonight. Just like old times.’

‘You remember, ain’t’cha? From back when you was Jack Clune and his Company Singers,’ she said.

“‘Wahn yew wus!’ Where are you supposed to be from?’

‘Me? Mississippi by way of Valium. Mallory *Tanzer*.... Howdy, gorgeous!’

She winked at him and blew him a kiss. He was laughing.

‘What’s so funny with you, pal? My name is Mallory *Tanzer*.’

‘Howdy, pardner.’

‘Mah name is... that’s not it, no, no!’

She laughed with him, and stopped laughing first. She went back to reading the screenplay.

‘You got any orbs?’ he said.

‘No, baby.’

He sulked about that for a while, and then thought of something else:

‘Did you ever come see me play?’

‘What?’ She looked up. ‘I come every night. I was there every night. What do you mean, did I ever come see you... Every goddamn night.’

Now it wasn’t sulking. He looked troubled. Confused. She set aside the screenplay and held out her arms to him, and he came over and knelt beside her and put his head in her lap.

‘You are a crazy old ding-a-ling,’ she said. ‘Listen: *He took me down to Sugartown and showed me how to dance the Bumblebee...* Capital B, Bumblebee. That’s how it goes. What kind of dance is that?’

‘The Bumblebee?’ He knelt up. ‘O, it’s a famous dance!’ And he leaped to his feet and stomped around and flapped his arms and shouted: ‘Hunny! Hunny! Hunny-y-y!’

It wasn’t the silly dance that moved Satu, but the way he wanted desperately to make her laugh, and so she did, and went on until there were tears she could wipe from her eyes, and she could say: ‘Hoo! Hoo! Stop! No more!’ And she wiped them away and said that, and Jack bopped and bobbed happily about the room.

‘In the summer moon we drove up past the cannery, and danced along the sea...’

‘There, you do remember, don’t you?’ she said. ‘Only, you always sang it different from the record. *Danced the sea along*, you always sang.’

‘Danced the sea along...’

‘O, darling, it gets me in my soul even now, I swear to God. Why is that? Even now.’

‘Why’s what? I’m going for a walk, anyhow.’

‘Aw, no, stay with me here, let’s go to bed. C’mon, baby, tell me your stories, tell me where you came from, who’s your mama, where’d you go to school, can you make a roux...’

‘A what? A roo?’

‘Please, Jack, all the doctors say you’ve got to keep exercising your memory. Tell me...’

I am your learning companion.

You scare me a little more with that every time, Aux. Like you’ll come back really reset, one of these days. Is that what you’re trying to do? Just stay with me if you’re staying, Aux. Don’t make such a fuss about it.

Recalibration attempted.

What book was that from 'The isle of the dead.' I know it.

A Gentle-Evening-Weariness.

Huh. What a beautiful sad old thing, how could I forget? O, I loved it, Aux, I just loved it. I never went anywhere without it, that book. It really stuck in my heart, you know? Aux? ... What are you doing? Aux?

I'm here, Lasja.

What's going on?

It remains.

What?

The ship says this and nothing further. It remains.

How far are we from Venus?

The answer to that is uncalculable under prevailing real conditions. I convey a message: Do not be comforted.

That's it?

Do not be comforted. Advice repeats. Source is missing.

I really don't understand you sometimes, Aux. Most of the time. Do you realise this? You need to be clearer if you want to be close to me, like a person would adapt and communicate more clearly.

Do not be comforted.

You too! I'm not. Not at all.

I convey a message: Broken deal.

What? What message?

Broken deal.

Aux! Be clearer. What am I supposed to take from that? It's not clear.

Cannot set clarity. Source missing.

A cheerful tone.

Things are out of order, Lasja. A hot shower is ready. Supper is spinach and roasted pumpkin. Things are out of order. Dessert is blueberries and chocolate...

Aux, stop.

...and an ice cream sandwich. Yes, Lasja.

Aux, I'm going to ask you a question. All you need to say is Yes or No. Do you understand these rules?

Yes.

Are we safe here?

Yes.

Aux... Are we safe on this ship? Aux?

I am your learning companion.

Answer me, Yes or No. Are we safe on this ship?

Sometimes, Lasja. Sometimes the answer is yes, sometimes no.

I always know when you're coming home again

Keeping a body is hard work for the Dream addict, as for any xenoform that finds itself cornered in an imperfect host. Even Dream is not absolved, it too must work hard to stay alive, to adapt the substance in which it conducts its natural motion.

It's always a fixer-upper, the human body. Even cyborged with the most enduring mech, they all need constant maintenance of some kind. They're failing from birth. And the failure rate is what they would imply back in the old Ursu system when they called human forms 'Earthlings', and when they used to call Dream 'Earthling', not as a metaphor but as a way of saying something real about the way the human xenoform *is*, in relation to the light of Ursu. So when they called *her* Earthling, this child of Ielk and Iys and the slipstream, they meant something about her body, almost a warning, like 'failing from birth' and 'hard work to keep' and other things in that vein. Dog they called dog, wolf they called wolf, bear-people they called bears, humans they called Earthlings.

Dream and the human body are mediums for motion, so anything said about Dream or Earthling varies as a human body moves, as light and time move through it, as other creatures take it and use it and vary it. In a sense, Dream is such a creature, one that takes a body and varies it, though it's not sentience but sympathy that Dream works with—a natural sympathy! Dream differentiates in many ways, but can't be made synthetically, and doesn't grow predictably like a plant or fruit. It comes through a hulm, but a hulm is hard to come by. They grow natively in the Ursu system, on Serinthea and Johir and the companion moon Lu-Serir. With enough energy, many stars' worth, hulms can be bred, but it takes a star field to make the procedure reliable.

The corsair Salgar Byre once grew them for Epir in a star field he manufactured in a sidestream, one of the transitory bubbleworlds off the slipstream. Such fields come and go in vile chaos; their perverted physics cannot hold. Tales of them grow taller than the sagas of Sordamor.

All said, the Earthling body is not much different from an orb of Dream. It is transiting through Nature, swelling through in its own duration, possessing motion in and of itself. And at the limit of its duration, an Earthling body, like an orb of Dream, collapses hard and disintegrates, its absence healed over by a temporal skin not always perceptible to the Earthlings that remain.

It is hard work for the Dream addict, anyhow, caught between *when* and *why*, duration and sympathy, *here* and the summary moment of death. The addict body joins the orb of Dream, even though the orb is the one brought into the body. Leik are added before the body has any inkling where it's headed, what it's done, why all this variation, though the body may feel this as fate: leik anticipate the body, they already know their way through it. Here they are, waiting. Thus redeemed, why else but Dream?

Yet, it's not inevitable that a body should go one way or another, Dream body or otherwise. Even Lasja, no mere accident of Nature, is meaningless in herself. She is no more or less essential than the sentient seas of Ementima.

To Aux, though, she *is* Nature. She is the medium of all existence, as was Bahar, and Marieta Escriva, and Yelsa Manos. It is hard work for Aux, too, keeping a body. Aux is coded for the sympathy game, striving to learn and change in sympathy with its host body, the physical substance of its natural motion.

Lasja...

It is hard work.

I always know when you're coming home again...

She tried to imagine herself a woman in love

Pregnancy, which her therapist remarked could indeed produce flashbacks from a former and substantial Dream addiction, made Satu Zertov feel all the more dull, stupid, and ignorant of subtlety, all the more useless and exhausted. She could not conceive of mothering the thing, and resented it for what it was doing to her senses and her self-esteem, but for long enough the procedure of abortion turned her stomach more than the idea of birth, and the pregnancy proceeded in a sickening yet tolerably distant way, as though her body had made its choice and did not require her support.

That year on Titan, filming *Coin of the Soul* with Lou Destrier, she felt vestigial lek, sluggish and arcane, refashioning her uterus and vascular system. The changes brought her calm and relief from her constant pain, so she did not question them, and did not tell Jack or Lou Destrier. She wanted to tell Bahar, but found that she could only allude to what was happening, to the way lek were moving in her. A constraining impulse kept her from communicating clearly. And Bahar, at that time, was often absent, flying Lou from moon to moon to shoot inserts for the film. Satu's time with Bahar was snatched from Lou's schedule, and she did not want to waste it on complaints about her body. She needed Bahar, and wanted Bahar to need her.

Once, late at night, returning from Enceladus, Bahar came up to her suite at the Hotel Giroux, and they made coffee in the kitchenette.

'Stay the night,' said Satu. 'Look at all this space.'

Bahar shook her head a little.

'Not tonight. I need to leave again.'

'I love you,' Satu insisted. 'Please stay. I love you.'

Bahar kissed her on the lips, but only that.

‘Later. Not now.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘Sarazin. I’ll be back in a few days.’

Satu tried to shrug off her disappointment, tried to smile.

In the night, alone, a cold-blooded fear surged through her, and by dawn the changes in her had ceased, and the old pain returned. Always in the mouth of something, Satu. It squeezes her nerves, her bones. She cannot catch her breath. There is a smell in the air like burned butter.

In the middle of the night she snaps awake in panic. She has grown a stumpy penis, a ball of blame, soft and dense and hot. Jack snores beside her. A cartoon sound. Nauseated by the smell of his breath, she kneels astride his neck and crams the ball of blame into his mouth, working it inch by inch down his throat, searching for a place to hide it.

She woke as if a bomb had gone off in her head.

s-s-s-SNAP!

Smearred out and repugnant in gloom and staleness, she coughed the shape of blame from her throat. Jack stirred and turned away from her. He curled up with a huff and a hiss and snored back to sleep.

Satu watched him for a while. She tried to imagine herself a woman in love who would spare time after waking to watch her darling husband sleep, and even kiss him as she got out of bed to go and do whatever. She watched him awhile, and then tilted her head, made a gun with her finger and thumb, put it in her mouth, and blew out her brains all over him.

Maybe it would all amount to nothing. Maybe the thing would die in her and spill out in pieces, or someone would dig in and extricate it; or, to hell with it, she would give it life, however demented it was, and so on, whatever. Feed it, nurture it, turn it loose.

What helped her sleep, at last, was to picture herself on stage instead of Jack, performing his shows, singing his songs better than he ever sang them. It was the Café de los Poetas in Manhattan, a packed house, the crowd entranced. The Company Singers would fire Jack and hire her, and he'd be forgotten, humiliated. Satu Zertov, voice of a generation.

Whistle while you dream, sing your troubles far away... As far, as far as a dream can seem...

Something from a long ago memory

‘Whistle While You Dream’ was a fan favourite from his old nightclub days, back when he was Jack Clune and The Company Singers:

Whistle while you dream

Send your troubles far away

Far as a dream can seem

Cry 'cause you've seen all the seein'

But you've got to go on bein', darlin'

Whistle while you dream.

Once, Satu challenged him on how much nonsense it was: ‘If you’ve sent your troubles far away, Jack, what’re you cryin’ about? You’ve got no troubles, they’re all gone! And if you’ve seen all the seein’, isn’t that the greatest thing? You’ve lived a full life, a fine life, seeing everything there is to see, right? I do not know what you’re *cryin’* about, Jack, if you can settle into *bein’* and not worry any more about the *seein’*... You’ve seen, you’ve been, ain’t that enough? You’ve really lived!’

‘Sally,’ he said, his pet name for her, ‘when you sing the way I do, honest to heaven no one gives a sweet goddamn if anything makes any sense. I’d just as well sing the Dulux catalogue and no one’d care, so long as it sounded good.’

‘Yeah, you oughta! I dare you...’

The Company Singers were a swing band Jack discovered at the Lindon Hotel in Eden City, Mars. Not a one of them could sing, but they were a fine swing band, and

Jack really did have an extraordinary voice, and when he thought about being out front of a band he liked the way it felt.

The first time Satu laid eyes on him, she wanted him as she wanted all beautiful things that flustered and aroused her. It was in Los Angeles, California, at the tenth anniversary party for Lou Destrier's cult movie of Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell*. Jack was there performing with The Company Singers. He was so beautiful she laughed out loud. She took him more or less directly to bed, and worked at making herself impossible to forget.

There were sparks of danger about Jack Clune. He slept little, drank hard, orbbed Dream, and owed money for the latter on just about every planet and moon in the system. He usually had a black eye or a busted lip or glued-up knife wound courtesy of some orb runner trying to teach him financial responsibility. And Jack was sympathetic to their work, he understood his punishment and did not resist it, but he was a committed addict and Dream came before all else. He went on orbing more than he could pay for. Now and then a debt collector really hurt him, but Jack had friends and fans all over, and even getting his neck cracked down in Baton Rouge, Louisiana didn't stop him. In New Orleans, a fan named John Lacey ran a knitting ward, and Jack got the best bed in the house. While his new vertebrae knitted, the Company Singers took a residency at the The Heron, uptown on Carondelet. They hired a stylish, punctual, hatchet-faced singer named Spin Ronchini, a local poet and dinner club crooner. He came from Algiers on the evening loop, ate a plate of fried shrimp at Casamento's, drank three Old Fashioneds at Tamara's Salon on Milan Street, and was smooth and square at The Heron by nine.

At interval, that night, Satu bought enough orbs of Dream from Spin Ronchini to fill her coat pockets, and she went to visit Jack at the knitting ward. It is hard work, keeping a body. She only started orbiting Dream after she met Jack. She took to it right away. The old lelk cradled her and would recover her awhile from the awful mouth of pain. She never blamed Jack for the habit. She was always in the mouth of something, and Dream was her sometime fix. The rest of the time the pain just went on gnawing at her, shapeshifting.

At the knitting ward, Jack was swaddled in the machine's rigging, his face lean and gentle and tired, his greying hair unwashed. Pale eyes welled with tears when he saw Satu in the doorway.

'I always know when you're coming home again,' he sang, straining.

She had on an ox-blood mini dress with pockets and a lace bodice, and pale grey tights and tall black starpilot boots. It was almost midnight. She wheeled over a metal tray and took the orbs from her pockets one by one and made a circle with them on the tray.

'Well ain't you just the sweetest pea,' said Jack, and he smiled his charming, crooked smile. 'I can already move this arm again, Mar—'

He almost called her *Mari*. Marieta, Marieta... He reached for an orb. Satu pushed the tray closer.

'I like it when you can't get away,' she said, and broke open another orb for him. One after another, just like that.

On a usual day, he woke, showered, half-dressed, made coffee, shaved and finished dressing, then went to wherever his practice room was that day, sometimes the nightclub before it opened, sometimes a studio at a music school, or a piano in a hotel

lobby, or in a patron's home. He'd hang a Thompsons from his lips, open up a box of orbs, and play for four or five hours. Orb after orb, Thompsons after Thompsons, just like that. Sometimes he would play something from a long ago memory, a classical recitation, Beethoven, Bach, Mozart. It is hard work, keeping a body, but when he had Dream, Jack always felt fine, and looked fine, and had an earnest fervour for life and music. He enjoyed the game of consciousness as if the universe had been invented solely to delight him.

Another time, years later, he and Satu loaded *Morningcrow* with cases of Dream and sailed out to Mars. Jack had rented a townhouse in Elysium, and in the garage he had a baby blue Detzler Allegro, and in that car he drove Satu all over Mars, sharing the orbs, touring the grand cities and looking at art, attending symphonies, operas, nightclub shows, writing poems and songs, rambling across the plain and down into the wide green valley and down into the rainforest, tramping and fucking, joyous as fauns.

Her name was Marieta

Lelk pressed shapes of other lives through their hearts, their bones and blood, their eyes and hands, into this world. Lelk made echoes of their bodies, other bodies that appeared in the world and lived for a time, close and ever closer, but never intersecting. It was not lost on Jack that his Dream habit was reshaping his body, too. All this lys and lelks. The change was slow, vague. He had trouble keeping his own chronology straight. *Le prix de Dream c'est seulement Dream*. He would lose track of Satu. When he would find her, and go on with her awhile, he could not stay close enough to her. A penetrating silence held them together and kept them apart. Each time he found her, there would come a day when he woke up and she was gone. Her clothes and books and personal effects remained, but there was no trace of her, no physical trace she had ever been with him. In New Orleans he hired a private detective, Lucy Prideaux, to find her. Lucy kept losing track of Satu, before she herself vanished. Her office on Dublin Street had turned into an android repair shop.

After his neck knitted, Jack realised he might be flooded from all the Dream. He could now remember conversations he'd had long ago with Sem Morrow. These memories became restless hedrons that spun and rolled and transformed behind his eyes. With vague success, he discerned a chronology to their encounters, as a drunk retraces his steps trying to locate his keys, wallet, watch.

Sem always had a hulm. If Jack was flooded, Sem would sort him.

Lelk cling to the grain of your voice.

No one had seen Sem Morrow in years. Following the vague chronology, Jack travelled to Palm Springs, California, and drove out to Bombay Beach. There, the year

before the first Mining War, Sem had worked at a small salvage yard repairing Claremont Pixies, graceful little starskippers, and the occasional Archer or Corso that someone wanted to commission into military service. Most nights he drank with Jack at the Ski Inn. Sem was rebuilding a Claremont Corso at the time, a cunning little ship, he called it, named *Morningcrow*. He had added a medical bay and expanded the cargo hold, reconstituted the AI, and added bolesura slipstream shielding salvaged from a Johir cargo ship that crashed up near Monterey.

Jack drove out to Bombay Beach. The Ski Inn was still there, a long, low building, part bunker and part bar, its walls and ceiling covered in old dollar bills that customers had signed and pinned up. The drinks were cheap and generous. He drank all night. Sem Morrow did not come in. Jack asked around, but none of the regulars had seen him in years. The bartender didn't know how long he'd been gone.

'Five years, maybe,' the old man said. 'I don't know, I lose track. Long gone, that's all. They come back sometimes, but what's here to come back to? They get gone again, stay gone.'

Jack loaded songs in the jukebox and sang along, exercising his voice. He went on drinking. His voice was rough, but coming back. Maybe he'd make it again, go back to the Company Singers and go round the circuit one more time.

'Those days are long gone, Jacky-boy,' he heard Sem say, and he turned and there he was, Sem Morrow, right there raising a glass. Jack's heart turned upside-down. He reached out to place a hand on Sem's shoulder, joyous: 'Old friend!'

But there was nothing there. He fell off his bar stool, pulling the others clattering down around him.

Sem Morrow had lived in a shipping crate hut on his property on the Aisle of Palms at Bombay Beach. It was still there, unoccupied, and the old code for the door still worked. Inside, dust and spiders and silence, a motley set of plates and cups, old photographs on a wooden dining table, and a cracked leather sofa. Photographs of Morrow and Clune, young, and of young Satu. A black and white photograph of Sem, side by side with a smaller creature, not human, a corpulent creature with a wide, lipless mouth.

Jack slept on the sofa. In his dream he saw *Morningcrow* in the subterranean hangar beside Sem's hut. At dawn he went out to the hangar, and it opened for him, recognising his gait, his eyes, his handprint. The ship was still there.

Dream takes things out of order and brings them back askew, as if your mind's been rifled, everything lifted up, inspected, and put back not quite in the same place.

He returned to Palm Springs to buy an upright piano. In the rack of business cards by the restroom at Rick's, he found a flood sorter advertising that she would do that or any other odd job. 'Has truck,' read the card. 'Will haul.'

Her name was Marieta. She knew his music, yes, and who he was, yes. She was underwhelmed. Jack had her pick up the piano and drive it out to Bombay Beach. She was a tall, dusky, athletic woman, broad-shouldered and strong in the neck. She helped him move the piano onto *Morningcrow*. He thought she had the smell of a Dream addict, that delicate, damp, silvery scent. As payment he offered her orbs.

'You gotta give me money,' she said. She inclined her head at the ship. 'Or that.'

'O, now, well, listen, listen, I can't do either of those things just now,' said Jack. 'But this is Aphrinea Dream, it's better than money.'

‘What’s better than money? I know what, a starship! I’ll take it. What’s the frequency code?’

‘Listen,’ he said, ‘listen,’ and tried to think of what to say. The sun was out hard and bright. He wasn’t used to this much light. Sweating, squinting, wetting his lips: ‘See, listen, I’m well and truly flooded, now. I need a sorter. My ghosts’ve got ghosts.’

‘You pay up front, I can do that for you, too. I don’t see the connection, if you’re implying one.’

‘I can get you money,’ he said. ‘I need a little time. I’m good for it.’

‘O, sure thing, I believe you! All right, all right, the last honest man. Lucky me! Here, look, I’ll tell you what I’m going to do, I’m going to take down my pants and you can fuck me right in the ass, how about that?’

She stared at him, and waited.

‘We just got the piano loaded, for God’s sake,’ Jack complained. ‘Come on, now.’

Staring, waiting.

He began to laugh:

‘Now don’t give me the hi-lo, baby! Be serious, please. I have all these orbs, worth a fortune.’

‘Sell ’em, then. Get money, pay me,’ said Marieta. ‘Meantime, I get the ship. I’ll give you a month to make your bundle. It’s slipworthy, right?’

‘Be serious, please, be serious...’

‘Tell me how you figure this is my joking face,’ she said. With one eye closed, she stared hard at his throbbing aura. ‘You are tangled, all right. I see maybe half a dozen of you right there, two by two. You’re about the seventh, if it’s even you. Hard to tell. I’ll sort you for the ship, end of discussion.’

‘One month, you said.’

‘That was before. Make it mine, I’ll fix you by sundown.’

Her graceful smile.

‘Here we are,’ she added. ‘Just like old times.’

Jack sweated and swayed. He turned away, took an orb from his pocket and broke it open, and pressed it to his face. The lys unfolded into his eyes and nose. Gentle lelk rippled through his skin.

Marieta, Marieta...

He turned back, squinting, the orb skin pinched between his fingers.

‘You’re Juan Escrava’s kid, aren’t you. I’ve known you...’

‘Sure, baby.’

‘Familia Escrava, that’s it. You’re Juan’s little girl! I knew your daddy in the war, we played his songbook in the band. How about that?’

Marieta shrugged.

‘He always talked about you,’ Jack said. ‘Used to always show us pictures of you. I’ve known you a long time.’

She was already shaking her head.

‘You’re so smeared you don’t know which one you are. Which Jack, of all the Jack Clunes that come and go. I’ve seen one or two, myself.’

He heard her say this, and then heard himself, off to one side:

‘Don’t you talk to me in fucking riddles.’

He licked his lips. Marieta watched him carefully.

‘My wife is out at Serinthea,’ he said. ‘You know Satu Zertov? I’m married to her.’

She was nodding along.

‘What kind of thing to say is that?’ she said. ‘Go on.’

‘My wife Satu Zertov, the famous actress,’ he said. ‘Out at Serinthea, I know it.’

‘You’re flooded, that’s what you know. How do you know anything else? Could be there, could be somewhere else, right? Your wife.’

Tears welled in his eyes.

‘I miss her like crazy,’ he said. ‘I’m homesick, I’ve been alone too long, do you understand? I need to get back to my wife.’

‘Yes, but I don’t care,’ said Marieta.

He looked helpless and pained, almost panicked.

‘I mean it doesn’t make any difference,’ she said, and tapped her head: ‘I’ve got the fix, my friend. You’re drowning. You need me.’

His body numbing, he felt his mind slur and slip away; and when he came clear again he was nodding, and his neck was hot, and he was still biting his lips to keep from crying.

‘There are cracks all over it,’ he said. ‘Half the seals are gone. I can get you a restored one, it’ll fly better.’

‘It’s pristine,’ said Marieta. ‘We don’t have to go through this every time, you know.’

‘Go what? Through what?’

‘O, you know.’ Her shrug was like a wave taking shape. ‘Never mind. I’m on a different vec, I guess. What’s the frequency code?’

‘O, you know,’ he echoed. ‘You know the one. My one good old song that everyone remembers wrong: *I always know when you’re coming home again*,’ he sang. ‘*The days turn cold, the sky turns blue, all my sunny daydreams turn ’round you...*’

Dream dazzled in him. Lelk shone in his eyes.

He took an orb from his pocket, broke it open, held it to his face. The lys curled out to take him. He didn't know what else to say. Another orb, broke it open, held it to his face.

I could take just one, just one of me

The planet's rings an arch of misted light across the sky.

Out on Titan, Satu lived in fifteen-day cycles. Fourteen of them she waited, keeping track of the light, waiting for the weird artificial sun to pass behind the planet. On the fifteenth day, in faint natural sunlight and Saturn's honey mustard glow, she filmed her scenes.

The movie was *Coin of the Soul*, Satu's adaptation of Yelsa Manos's novel *A Gentle Evening-Weariness*. She wrote the screenplay and starred as Mallory Tanzer. Lou Destrier was her director, their fourth project together. The scenes on Titan were the last to be filmed. They had moved the production there to capture the subtle colours of the natural Sun's faint light, which Lou insisted could not be reproduced on Earth. Her antique cameras and restored computers captured an older, and to Lou a more artistically correct vision of the Sun's natural grace. The last shot on Titan would be the first shot of the movie, the singular beauty of Saturn's rings.

It was one day of filming and fourteen days of waiting for the Allied Faith's artificial sun to orbit between Tethys and Dione and pass behind Saturn, which briefly obscured the sun's broad, thin light. Like slipstream gates, the artificial star was an old piece of Johir technology remitted to Earthling use. It was an immense agitation of lys contained in a semi-sentient crystal sphere, but its only correspondence with human genetics was its visual aspect. Its dry, flat light illuminated but did not sustain or damage. It did not grow plants or bodies, did not burn skin, did not hurt eyes, did not contribute to ageing, so it was said. But the light gave Satu migraines and made her feel

weak and befogged, and nor did the creature growing in her body approve. The creature remained restless and hungry, and it squirmed and kicked whenever it was in the light.

Our native Sun is dying, declared the Allied Faith. We cannot settle even our own system without mobile stars. We must become a species of many suns, of continuous, reliable energy, spanning far beyond the reach of our Sun. *We* must light the darkness.

Satu's belly grew, but not the rest of her. She was always in the mouth of pain. In nearby villages she sought medicine from local healers, but all of their prescriptions failed. Her body wanted Dream, but whenever she brought it up with a healer they would turn away and tell her to leave.

Now Jack was two months late, and uncontactable, and the situation frustrated her, she hated to waste worry on him but worried nonetheless. Clumps of pain gathered in her legs and hips. She walked as though wading upriver, a monotonous effort.

'You can't find your way back, and you don't have the strength to go on,' Lou directed her in rehearsal. 'It is the sixth hour. Your mother has placed false knowledge in your head, it has been there since you were a child, and it has become, for you, the plain truth of life.'

'What false knowledge?'

'No "what" questions, Mallory. You have been indoctrinated. In your understanding of the world, all of time and space is in relation to the human soul. The soul is your measure of time. You say there are nine hours of the soul—'

'I'm some kind of a Christian?'

'Nine hours of the soul, Mallory. The hours change and contort and move in and out of one another. Mallory, you are now in the sixth hour, the hour in which your terrible

fear and madness resume. They are resuming from another consciousness, one you inherited, a consciousness folded with your own.'

'Like God? Like Christ?'

'I will read you this passage, don't try to know or understand, but memorise it. Mallory has memorised it. You have heard it all your life: "Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land, unto the ninth." This is the darkness before the death of consciousness, which has its own obscure time and duration, and cannot be understood in terms of the death of the body. The body ends at the seventh hour, consciousness goes on until the ninth. In that last hour either all is lost, or all is found. Mallory, the plane of all reality unfolds at the ninth hour. You are taken away with it and resumed somewhere else, when it folds again. The count resumes, and you are in another body, perhaps.'

'And I'm in the sixth hour, before death.'

'Yes.'

'And you want me to...'

'Just *know* this. Just know it. You anticipate your physical death and you anticipate the persistence of consciousness to the ninth hour.'

'Anticipate it. I see.'

Mallory Tanzer, in a voiceover at the beginning of *Coin of the Soul*, says: 'There are too many of me.' This begins the first publicity clip put out by the studio. It was playing on subway walls in New York City even before they had finished filming. 'I've lost control,' Mallory says. 'I could take just one, just one of me. That could be happiness. But I see them pouring off me, variations of myself, just pouring off. I could be happy with just one! I don't want them, I could be happy...'

She does not always remember. They do not usually need to. Memory is not the treasure it once was.

Her outfit for a quiet early dinner with Lou was a calf-length mulberry purple jumpsuit and black ankle boots. She added big gold hoop earrings and a gold Cartier necklace with a ruby blood drop pendant. To bone white foundation, blended to fade down her throat, she added terracotta lipstick and black eye liner, and then two ruby facepaint stripes across her nose and cheeks, and one long ruby line descending from the lower stripe down her nose and philtrum, down her chin and throat, thinning down the strong shield of her sternum to the zipper of her jumpsuit, lowered six fingers above her navel. Six, six, sixth moon, sixth hour.

She practised Satu Zertov's smile.

Here we are.

Hail, hail, the gang's all here

Her full name was Saturnia, but only her mother had ever called her that. She chose Satu for herself.

Lying alone in the dark, on the tall, soft bed in her suite at the Giroux, she let herself fall into a fever of visions. Blue birth, grey childhood, blinding white adolescence. She saw her father's family in Eden City on Mars, every Christmas spent with them, every terraformed Martian dusk a pastel parade that would recall to her the taste of marshmallow and musky kisses from aunts she barely knew.

She lay in peace within this vision, a happy moment, before her memory of the creature's absurd conception intruded. It was Mars again, but this time Elysium, and Jack was dressed up as Santa Claus, and a lazy, Dream-fuzzed fuck before he left to perform at a Christmas Eve concert. She regretted it as soon as they commenced. How stupid he looked, his cotton-bearded face huffing over her, bowed in the little torment of ejaculation. Undignified girl!

Apricot shadows shivered against the window and the gauzy curtain.

'Jack...'

Still not here, never here.

In *Coin of the Soul* it is the moonlight making Mallory Tanzer sick. She has travelled with her husband to Velle, a citadel on Titan. He is seldom present, more like a consort. Everyone calls him 'your husband'. She calls him 'my husband'. She and her husband have moved from country to country many times, from planet to planet, back to Earth, city to city and away again, now to Velle.

Mallory has wanted to make the marriage work. She loves him, but why? ‘But I *love* him,’ she finds herself insisting. But what did you talk about last night? Well, we finish work at different times, some days we miss each other. When did you last eat a meal together? I cook enough, he never goes hungry. What did you do this morning? We fought, we argued, but that’s us! I can’t remember what about. It’s just who we are. It’s not unusual, we’ve been together a long time now.

Her husband is a freelance diplomat, a lobbyist for governments and powerful corporations, a fixer for the patrician class. ‘I honestly have no idea what he does all day,’ Mallory tells her friend Lance, another time. They have run into each other at the spaceport in Singapore. Lance is always on the move, too, but he and Mallory speak often, keep each other’s confidences, make arrangements to meet in passing and share a drink or dinner. ‘What am I missing?’ Satu hears Mallory say. She said: ‘I know I’ve gone wrong here, I’m missing something. I’ve done something wrong, Lance, but no one tells me what it is. No one even wants to get angry at me about myself any more. I don’t know how to fix us. All I know is he’s drifting, and, God, I feel like such a cliché for saying that. I *am* a cliché. My husband is drifting away. I’ve done something wrong. I’ve become someone I shouldn’t have. I should have been more serious with my life, right? I should have a career by now, I should be respectable, I should have a job. I need to find work right now. This is not where I should be at this point in my life. I need money, I need to make credit,’ said Satu, and Lance was there with her, with Mallory, with her in the stillness of the hotel suite. ‘O, God... How did I let myself be taken along like this, just attached to *his* life? I let it go on too long. I needed him to carry me, but I let it go on too long, I got cosy, and you know I don’t like to be cosy. What is it with me? What the hell is my problem with work? Why can’t I just get a *job*?

Ah! I can hardly say it, that's why. I wouldn't last a week in an office, I'd throw myself out the window. But what do I do? I just follow him around. I'm Spot the dog. I must have been out of my mind. Do you think I cost myself my own happiness? You can tell me. Maybe, right? I know. Maybe I could let go of more. What do I need a soul for, anyhow?'

'That's not fair,' said Lance. 'You're in love.'

'I am. I was. I am and was. I *hate* thinking it's gotten to be more 'was' than 'am'. I hate it. I loved him so much I'd do anything for him, anything to keep him, and now I guess I'd do anything to let him go... free... Free as a bird, loose from the ol' ball and chain! Get angry at me, Lance, come on.'

'When did I ever get angry at you? It won't happen.'

'That's your problem, you're too calm... I'll get a job. There.'

'Mallory, you've been sick half your life. It's a real thing. If you're worn out, you're worn out, but *your* problem is you beat yourself up worse than any situation ever calls for.'

'There, keep going, get angry.'

'If you want a job, I can get you one. There's plenty of work.'

'I don't want that Dream work. I want to make *this* work. Sure, I know that! Don't we all. Stupid girl, I'll cut you!'

Satu flashed an imaginary knife at her throat, and Mallory laughed.

'I want to make it work,' they said. 'I want to be with him, but these days he goes away before I even know where he was. I have no idea when he's coming home again, and now look at me, all knocked up. Hail, hail, the gang's all here! What a daisy...'

Satu lifted her shirt and held out her pinky finger and stroked herself on the belly.

‘Fertile like a farm girl.’ She leaned forward. ‘Pat me, I’ve been good.’

Lance laid a hand on her head.

‘Arise, Lady Mallory.’

She laughed in Mallory’s wide-mouthed way.

‘O, but I feel rotten, Sem, just rotten...’

Lance was there, as Mallory would see him, and she did see him that way, but then her vision shifted and she saw Sem Morrow, too, Sem talking about Jack:

‘Man keeps nagging at me to get him a hulm. He’s always leaving messages about it.’

‘Sem, is it really you?’ said Satu. ‘I have to apologise, I’m not feeling so good myself. I get a little scrambled, you know, in my dotage here.’

‘You could try that,’ said Sem. ‘Don’t you have friends in the racket?’

‘Is it really you? Can I believe it?’

‘He believes it.’

‘Well, I... I don’t know if you can hear me, Sem. Is it you?’

‘You say. What about the baby?’

‘Hm. Now there’s a Rubicon for you, whoever you are.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Ah? You’re listening? O, you know, quitting Dream, having a baby... A couple of Rubicons, I guess. It’s nothing, just a thing I heard.’

An ice cream skiff drifted by the suite, chiming its haunting song.

‘A hulm,’ said Mallory. ‘You’re telling me a hulm is the reason he’d come back to me.’

‘I’m not saying it’s right.’

‘It really isn’t.’

‘It’s just an idea.’

Satu nodded thoughtfully.

‘It is what it is,’ Sem added.

‘How about this Patti woman?’ she said. ‘The one from Berlin. Am I right? Is he fucking her?’

‘Patti? I doubt it. She likes girls.’

Satu worked her jaw, chewing through the surge of anger. Mallory said: ‘Don’t call them *girls*. They’re *women*. You have a cruel habit of holding women down with the things you say, do you realise that? Words mark out boundaries, “girl” marks out a boundary. Patti likes *women*.’

Satu stared at him. Sem looked annoyed.

‘Patti calls her “my girl Abbie”,’ he said. ‘Aberdeen Cloud is what she calls herself.’

‘And you need to think about how you might be more respectful and not just parrot whatever you hear.’

‘Do you know her? She’s a good pilot. Tauran.’

‘The woman fucking my husband?’

‘O, she is not, she’s not fucking anyone but Patti,’ said Lance. ‘Don’t be so goddamn dramatic, Mallory.’

She pressed her palms to her temples. Mallory wanted to refocus; Satu wanted to refocus. The conversation had slipped away, slipped into memories she couldn’t rightly claim. Which ones were hers? Memories floated through her. Which one are you? Satu or Mallory?

She watched Lance, seeing him as Lou Destrier would see him, seeing the way he looked at Mallory. Satu pressed her palms to her temples, watching him shake his head, seeing the ghost of old Sem Morrow shaking his head like a tired dog. Was it Sem you were talking to? Who are you there telling the story of Sem and Satu?

She was still there, watching, waiting for an answer, when Jack burst into the suite and turned on all the lights. Satu screamed, her startled heart whirled, pain flooded her arms and legs.

‘Sally! Sally, did you miss me? When I’m long gone, Sally, do you miss me?’

He leaned down to kiss her on the cheek. He smelled like sweet wine. Something heavy in his coat pocket knocked against her breast.

‘Sally, Sally, I’ve got a way to go on... I’ve got to sort these out, can I move this stuff?’

He pushed aside her things on the table, her notes and Lou’s notes to her, the coffee cup and a little amber bowl that held her talismans, and into this clearing he poured dozens of silvery, transparent crystals from a big medicine bottle. Each one, all about the same size, had a piece of something dark captured in it.

‘I’m going to buy Sem Morrow’s place on Serinthea with Remy,’ he said. ‘Well, he bought it already, I just need to pay my end. Hey, when you’re done here with Lou, we can move out there! I’ll get work here on the moons while you finish up. How much longer, do you think?’

He sorted through the crystals, every so often piling them up again, sorting them out, peering at one or another of them.

‘What for would I go to Serinthea?’ said Satu. ‘I’m exhausted, Lance. I want to go to bed. Cut that out, will you! Where the hell have you been all this time? I’m tired as hell...’

Jack looked up at her.

‘You want me to read with you? Is this the film?’

The pain was in her neck, in her jaw, stammering her. Always in the mouth of something, Satu.

‘I’ve g-got to tell you something,’ she said.

‘Mm? How’s your head?’

‘I’m pregnant.’

Jack seemed not to hear. He stood and regarded the crystals, and shrugged.

‘Close. Not quite.’

He bent over and sorted them into new piles.

‘I’m pregnant,’ she said.

‘Repeat that.’

‘I am pregnant! Am I having a fucking stroke? I’m pregnant, you got me pregnant, Lance. It’s on its way, and you are the responsible party.’

He clicked his teeth, staring at her.

‘Don’t ask me that horrible thing again,’ she said. ‘I’ve warned you.’

‘You’re not going to get rid of it?’

Satu got up and hurried to the bathroom and waved her hand over the toilet deck.

The lid rose in a graceful arc and she thrust it back and vomited into the bowl. The pink metallic taste clung to her teeth.

‘I’m not unhappy,’ he said, hovering in the doorway.

‘Well, fuck, that’s what I dreamed you’d say! My wildest fucking fantasy...’

Satu lost language to fury. She wanted to destroy him.

In the bedroom she filled her suitcase with clothes and rammed everything else into two handbags. She heard Jack say ‘Where are you going?’ and heard him coming over to her, and when she felt him standing behind her she straightened up. She could feel the air tighten between them.

‘Turn around,’ he said.

She crossed herself.

‘God almighty, guide his hand.’

The rage wheezed in her neck.

After a while, she could hear him speaking to someone in the living room. A phone call. She could not make out what he was saying. She heard the stony tapping on the hard tabletop, and then the crystals scraping together and falling, tinkling.

She sat down on the bed and listened.

He began to speak again, a low, calm voice, conversational. She couldn’t make out the words. The nauseating pain took shape in her neck and branched up over her scalp.

Jack came into the bedroom with a huge orb in both hands, an orb the size of a grapefruit and cloudy white. With a grimace he knelt in front of her.

‘I don’t want it,’ she said.

‘You haven’t seen your face,’ said Jack. ‘You need a hulm, but this’ll hold you.’

‘I don’t want it. Take it away.’

‘Saturnia, you need this. You’re smeared out. Lou says you’ve been like this for weeks. There are sorters in Aphrinea, but you have to take something to tide you over. Get your work done here, get square, and we’ll go.’

‘What square? I hate the way you talk to me, like one of your hangers-on. I’m your wife! Who’s more square to you than me? Get that thing away, I don’t want it. I’ll fucking kill it.’

Jack was running his thumb around the circumference of the orb, turning it in his hands, pressing into it. The halves separated with small wet snaps like ligaments loosening. He pulled them apart and laid one on the bed beside Satu, and slipped his hand around the back of her neck. He pressed the other half of the orb to her face.

After a while she said:

‘I can’t feel my skin.’

Jack ran his tongue over his teeth.

‘Not bad, huh? I made it myself. Not bad.’

‘I’ll kill you...’

She lifted her hand in the shape of a gun.

Lelk breathe you, treelike.

Another night, this stammering chronology she could not crack, Satu found herself at dinner with him. The first course was parsnip and cauliflower soup, meant to mimic the white soup that androids consumed. The entrée fish of the day seemed misprinted, a fillet of sole: *Chef’s White Soul*.

‘I don’t think this is right,’ she said.

Jack looked up.

‘Give it a bit longer.’

Satu rubbed her neck, trying to crack open the knots of pain. They would not budge, and she only made the problem worse by knotting up muscles in her arm and shoulder,

until she could not move without sharp pain pulsing through her jaw and up over her head, ear to ear, and down her right arm to her trembling hand.

‘Tell me how you’re feeling,’ Jack said. ‘How’s the baby?’

She laughed, and stopped laughing.

‘The medscan, my love, says all is well. Our saviour lives.’

‘Is it a boy?’

‘Nope.’

Her jaw cracked like snapping wood as she smiled.

‘I feel horrible,’ she said.

‘There’s a lys pool out at Lake Eileen,’ said Jack. ‘They found lys here, too, in Velle, deep down, and they just found lys ice in the K-belt. It’s a big week.’

‘I’m going to call her Lasja,’ Satu said. ‘I’m going to keep her away from you...’

‘Anyone can stake a claim out there. I’m going to see about it.’

A group of men in black leather overcoats and elaborate bronze hawk masks came into the restaurant and sat at a big corner table.

‘Listen, Sally,’ Jack leaned forward. ‘Here’s the plan: I’m going to grow hulm somewhere out at Serinthea. I’ll make money that way. We’ll have all the things we need.’

‘Why don’t you just be my husband and stay with me? You can’t *grow* hulm, Jack. Everyone knows that.’

‘No, no, Remy’s done it. Terho Laine showed him how, Terho Laine himself, Sally. It’ll work. And we bought the château out near Aphrinea, me and Remy and Goodis. Remy’s got a whole setup out there, a clone of the old Pandimensional cortex and everything. We can live safe out there, it’s a great investment.’

Satu felt sweat on her face, her blood seeping cold.

‘What cortex?’ she said. ‘What are you talking about? What have you done? I’m *pregnant*, Jack.’

‘Right, and we need coin, and this is the way to get it.’

‘No! What? What did you do? We work, we make credit, we save. We agreed...’

Jack was staring at her in wonder.

‘You keep using the exact same words, every time,’ he said. ‘What goes on with you? Listen to me: there is no more credit. It’s all gone. All we have is common coin, we can’t get any better than that.’

‘O, God, where’s my handbag... I’m going to cry... Are you trying to tell me you burned us out? You burned our good credit? Where’s my card? What the hell is wrong with you?’

‘You don’t have cards! What happens in your brain, Saturnia? You’re blaming *me* again? *You* broke us, *you* blitzed our credit on that goddamn film. It’s so cute how you get to forget, but it’s your fault I have to wear this fucking Aux. Of course we’re going to Serinthea, where else can we live? Where else are there no banks? I’m going to dig this thing out of me, and I’m going to murder it. Ah! Jesus Christ! ... See? Zapped. Ain’t justice grand!’

A robot appeared to take their plates. Satu could not remember having eaten.

Gold chandeliers twinkled pretty light across the table.

‘I’m begging you... I’m begging you to make sense,’ she said in a small voice.

‘What *sense*?’ said Jack. ‘There’s no sense, it’s just a series of facts, they don’t make any sense. You’re smeared out, we don’t have credit, we can’t afford a flood sorter. We have to get gone, Sally, there’s no other option. I love you, anyway. I tell

you this every day, I love you. Why can't you get square? You're smeared out and broke, and still every time I come back from working off your debts, no matter what, you're eyes deep in Dream. Where do you even get it?'

'*You* give it to me, it's *your* fault!'

'I don't have any, for Christ's sake! What world are you living in? Where do you get this stuff? Who's giving you credit? Who's coming after us next? What a life, this endless stream of dead-end questions. There's no sense to any of it, you're right! But here we are, this is our life, senseless, meaningless. I love you. You drive me crazy, but I love you. Not because no one else'll take you, either, I don't want to hear that again. I love you because I *love* you, Saturnia.'

'But there's so much pain, so much... I'm begging you...'

Lelk rise through your recollection.

Jack looked as far as he could into her shocked eyes, their dense, pink aura. Just about every sentence she uttered was a lie, he thought, even if she didn't mean to be that way, just like she didn't mean to be in pain, she didn't mean to blow their credit. It didn't make it better, but he loved her. Anyway, it wasn't a matter of that, now, but a simple matter of how to get gone, how to slip the banks and the creditors and go on in some kind of sane way, with her smeared out in Dream.

Once, he might have thought them on a journey, on a path toward decisive success in their shared vision of life. They were both ambitious and wanted wealth and renown and adventure, all the splendid regalia of a Good Life, but they couldn't hold together. Dream unfolded them, and folded them another way, a little too far out of their control; and before they could change with the changes of Dream, they unfolded again, and refolded another way, and parts of them into different bodies, elsewhere, in other

places. Lek spill you out across the skin of time. Still, she never left him. Maybe she really did love him. Maybe she needed him. She lied through her teeth. Maybe she really couldn't help it.

I feel like God's rattle

‘Once I was a girl and they killed us all and I was buried in rubble and blood,’ she wanted to say to him, defiant and proud, as proud as she felt to deliver this line in *Coin of the Soul*. It was the opening sentence of Yelsa Manos’s novel *A Gentle Evening-Weariness*.

Lou Destrier wanted to film the scene in Velle, in the light of Titan’s artificial sun. The light was difficult to work with, stark and flat and yellowish, but she insisted they must capture it on the final day of its cycle, just before it slipped behind Saturn. The production was over budget. Satu had rescued it with her own money. They had transported the film set from Earth, the front wall and several apartments from Mallory’s childhood building. Growing up in Madrid, Yelsa Manos had been buried alive when a bomb destroyed her building as she was coming home from the cinema. Her parents and sister died. The family dog Casper, a sweet-natured Yorkshire terrier, buried inches from Yelsa beneath the rubble, survived with her, his panting her anchor to life.

Lou had the apartment set installed in a vacant plot of land in Velle. The weird artificial light streamed through the windows.

‘You can’t know how much these words have meant to me,’ Satu whispered, seeing Yelsa in her mind’s rippling eye. ‘You can’t know...’ She tried another way: ‘You cannot know how much these words mean...’

‘But nothing makes any difference,’ she could hear Mallory protest at the end of *A Gentle Evening-Weariness*. In the novel she stops there, but Satu, filming the scene for *Coin of the Soul*, had gone on, improvising, dredging her soul:

‘I do one thing, I do another, one thing and the next, but nothing changes. I try to love myself, but why do I feel so cheap? Nothing changes here. All my lunges at meaning... All these desperate little lunges come to nothing!’

Lou clipped the speech, and the studio let her distribute it without music, just Satu’s voice and the sound of the soft wind. As they filmed the last scenes out on Titan, this clip became the most popular and collected of the season, the most shared and traded, the most discussed.

Once I was a girl and they killed us all and I was buried in rubble and blood.

Even her, she thought. They even killed Mallory, killed her girlhood, her loving, gentle, open heart. In the novel it is unclear whom Mallory is addressing. Satu decided she was speaking to Lance, although by now Lance is dead. There were so many bombings in those days. It is a strange, opaque novel, and finally it is about the love of close friendship, rather than romantic love.

‘I don’t know how you can have any kind of close friendship without being a little bit in love,’ Yelsa once said in an interview. Satu remembered, and spoke Yelsa’s words to feel them in her body and her mouth, to feel them belonging to her: ‘I mean, physical love, in the sense of love that causes real desire, not just styled feeling. True sympathy, I suppose, between bodies. And not even sex, or not just sex, but a kind of merging, even if it’s temporary, of... you know... *hope*, I suppose. I know, I’m sentimental. Not that sex isn’t sentimental. I love sentimental sex. I’m always hopeful for it.’

The lek in her skin shone rosy and warm as she laughed.

Mallory, too, was always in the mouth of pain, always gripped by a snaking torment, and Satu experienced her own pain in perfect sympathy. Pain was their chronology,

their history and fate. In the mouth of Mallory's pain, Satu reread *A Gentle Evening-Weariness*, understanding for the first time that Mallory was pregnant, even from the opening line, that first scene. She was pregnant when the building fell on her and Casper. Her mother never knew. Mallory was not yet seventeen. Who was the father? The boy she had gone to the cinema with? Another? A man from the city? She was tall and shapely, delicately beautiful, resistant in a way that men liked to test themselves against. Had Mallory told the man about the baby? Not yet, no. A difficult conversation. She hadn't the courage yet to watch the blood drain from his face, nor to endure his anger.

Then a creature was growing in Mallory's body, too, and contorting and transforming her, and she too was scared of it, and ashamed. Satu felt her pain in sympathy.

In the dark of her suite, in Dream and that way escaping for a while from the inexhaustible mouth, Satu saw the building that would fall on her, that would fall on Mallory Tanzer. Frightened, she watched the door, waiting for Jack to come back drunk and manic. Tonight she would tell him, no matter what. Skeins of future flowed to her and split upon her, one part passing while the other swerved and speared back to fold into another future. *All these desperate little lunges...* She saw the apartment building explode. She saw Mallory pulled free, and Casper the dog, before the vision dissolved and split away, spearing into future. It would come again, folding another way, and yet familiar, even remembered: explosion, burial, waiting.

'I feel like God's rattle,' she told Jack, later, watching his hovering holo skip and glitch across the table, the image spreading out, stammering, dissolving and reforming. He had called her from the green room of a nightclub out at Lake Eileen.

‘Why doesn’t Lou just film the damn thing now and get it done with? We have to get you out of here, Sally. It’s a real no-good place.’

‘Put me out of my misery, that’s what I want. I don’t know why she doesn’t. I’m sorry. I don’t know why.’

The connection dissolved and blanked. The holo shrank back into the table.

All these desperate little lunges come to nothing!

Distilled into a clip, these words, and the vulnerability and resentment with which Satu delivered them, became iconic among her fans. The clip even made its way into art museums as part of a famous sculpture by Glaz Arub, called *Variant Annunciation*. The original is in Los Angeles, but it is a replicable work, anyone can order a kit to make a copy, and even exhibit it.

As with Glaz Arub’s other replicable works, there are guidelines. The exhibitor must provide the Designated Robot, who will be the director of variance. In the exhibition space, the Designated Robot, running Glaz Arub’s code, builds a garden and plants the seed provided in the kit. The seed grows into a small banyan tree over the course of one week. It is engineered to produce fast, leafy growth, and the tree will age and die from stress three weeks later. Its wood, as it grows, produces knots, each of which resolves into the face of Glaz Arub.

Becoming animate, these tree knot faces weep for the lost knowledge of their ancestors.

The Designated Robot now will teach the faces to quote Mallory Tanzer from *Coin of the Soul*, with varying emphasis:

‘All *these* desperate little lunges...’

‘*All* these desperate little *lunges*...’

‘All these *desperate* little lunges...’

And the knot faces, receiving this knowledge, are enlightened and redeemed, and repeat their variant lines in a cacophony until the tree dies.

In the gallery notes there is a clip of a test piece that Glaz Arub produced, in which an android face slips into a semi-sentient state as it downloads the dataflood. The flood overwhelms it. The android’s eyelids have been removed. Its eyes flicker alarmingly, this way and that, as it tries to make sense of the chaos of data. It cannot succeed. It slips into the flood. Its eyes roll back into its head as its forebrain burns out, and its face catches fire. Consumed in flame, the android cries out:

‘All these desperate little lunges come to nothing!’

You do as I say

At Lou Destrier's urging, Jack came back early from Lake Eileen. Satu was curled up in her bed, which she had pushed into the corner of the room.

His bag of tricks: loving touch, calm urging, singing to her, swaddling her in the soft control of his charisma. Tricks and routines. Mallory found them weird and unpleasant, she resented being petted. Satu shrugged him away.

'You don't stick around, you come and go...'

'Don't pick a fight, Sally,' he said. 'Come on now. I flew all the way back here to help you.'

'You're a real knight. I have to get off the planet, help me do that.'

'This is a moon,' Jack said, and grimaced at himself. 'Get up and do your work, Saturnia. You've got one more scene, one more line. They're all waiting for you.'

'She's killing me, exposing me to that sun. It'll make Lasja sick!'

Satu rolled over and saw that his coat pocket was bulging with orbs.

'Now gimme some of that, Jack. Gimme one... Jesus Christ, what happened to you?' Bloody bruises swollen all over his face. 'Have you looked in a mirror? You look awful!'

'I got a medium for the hulm,' he said vaguely.

'What medium? What hulm? Show me.'

'It's on the ship. Listen, this is good now, Sally, it's better than before. It's the best Dream I ever had.'

'Have you seen your face?'

'What the hell is wrong with you?' he yelled. 'Get your work done!'

The old cruelty in his eyes. Mallory watched his lip lift in a sneer; Satu felt her muscles tighten, deep.

‘I am your pregnant wife,’ she warned.

After a moment he said, ‘I’m going to talk to Lou again.’

All the while he had been sitting twisted uncomfortably on the bed, trying to lean over Satu to see her face, and the contortion was hurting his shoulders. He told her again what he was going to do, and went and did it.

He returned in the eerie artificial twilight. Saturn twinkled in the gilded sky.

I always know when you’re coming home again...

Satu was in the bathroom washing her face with a rough sponge. The bedsheets had been pulled back from a dark, stale-smelling stain, her underwear beside it, bloodsoaked.

‘What did you do?’ said Jack. ‘What happened?’

‘What did I do... Ha! We’re fine,’ she called out, and came into the bedroom rubbing lotion into her hands. ‘It’s fixing me now. I can feel our baby in there fixing me up. I had to trade some blood for lys, but it’s like they say, it happens so fast you hardly even notice. It doesn’t hurt at all. Where’s Lou?’

‘There’s a doctor coming,’ he said faintly. ‘What happened?’

‘Give me an orb, baby. Give me an orb. I’m half lys now, it’s good for me.’

‘You don’t smell right, Sally...’

‘No, give me an orb, come on.’

‘You don’t smell good. What happened to you?’

She sniffed her arm. Now he saw the blood caked in streams on her thighs.

‘The doctor’s coming,’ he said. ‘Let’s get you right.’

‘What do I smell like?’

‘Come back in the bathroom with me, let’s wash you up.’

As the bath filled up he sprinkled it with the hotel’s rose-scented bath petals. The water turned pleasantly pink.

‘Here we go,’ he said, and helped Satu into the tub, and sat her down, and right away the water turned red. She laughed at his dismay.

‘I’ll fix it,’ he said.

‘Let me get warm,’ said Satu. ‘We can fix it together. You’re looking okay, you know. Give me an orb, will you? The baby needs it now.’

‘All right, all right, I’ve got these little ones from my new hulm. They’re stronger’n they look, they’re sweet little things...’

He took a knobby orb the size of a blackberry from his pocket and held it in one hand and turned it, digging his thumbnail into it. Its skin snapped electrically and split open, and he parted the halves and put one half in Satu’s mouth, on her tongue, and cradled her head and held the other half to her nose. He cupped his hand for her to spit the skin into, but she spat it in the bath.

‘Anyway, you’re all turned around,’ she said. ‘I already filmed that scene. *Once I was a girl and they killed us all and I was buried in rubble and blood*. See? Done.’

‘Lou’s bringing her doctor.’

‘No, no, she doesn’t need that. Don’t you know you’re turned around? They’re leaving in the morning, gone to Earth.’

‘She’s going to bring her setup and film the last clip,’ Jack said. ‘Did she tell you she thinks she’s got scurvy? She’s got a fat man tagging along, he looks like hell...’

He was about to tell Satu about the man from the studio who had come to Titan to make a property deal with the Vellem, and who had found time to recut the opening of *Coin of the Soul*, and who was pressuring Lou to cut out Satu's first line, because the studio had their hot clip and didn't want dying in rubble and blood to overshadow all those desperate little lunges that come to nothing.

'I'm proud of you, Sally,' he said instead, and kissed her soft, damp, sour hair.

'Lord, I am tired,' she said. 'Time gets away... This Dream of yours is nothing, Jack. Do you even feel it?'

The doorbell chimed in the living room.

'Stay put, will you?' he said. 'Don't move around too much.'

'I'm a good girl.'

He went out.

Satu listened to the front door sliding and clicking, Jack's greeting, Lou's voice, the doctor's thick murmur.

'I'm not dressed,' she called out.

Jack came back with the doctor, a tall Vellem with a long, curved face.

'That's incredible,' he said, seeing Satu still where he'd left her. 'It's never like this. She's always gone,' he said to the doctor. 'It's nothing like before.'

'What's wrong with you?' she said. 'Who's this?'

'This is the doctor, I told you.'

The Vellem shifted shape, lowering herself in a lavender aura that reached out to Satu and glowed her with kindness and grace. The blood in the bathwater broke apart, misting into the aura and tinting it pink.

A soft beige stem telescoped from the doctor's chest, reached down through the aura and touched the water. Lifting the stem, the doctor pulled a long liquid thread from the bath, inspected it, and let it go. She pulled her leaf-like skin fold down over her face, symbolising contemplation. When she raised the fold, her smooth low voice emitted:

'The offspring has burrowed. Other passages for life have grown. Sufficient balance is near.'

'I knew it!' said Satu. 'I could feel it, Jack, I knew it.'

'You leave soon?' said the doctor.

'Tomorrow,' she said. 'Jack?'

'It's amazing,' he said. 'It must be real. Tomorrow, yes.'

'Bathe clean and rest,' said the doctor. 'Leave here as soon as possible and go to a natural star. This region will be at war and the light will extinguish. You need solar warmth and long rest.'

The doctor shifted shape and the lavender aura faded. She rose up and bowed to Satu, and to Jack, and then left.

Jack shook a Thompsons from his pack and stabbed it between his lips.

'Give me one of those,' said Satu.

He slipped one between her lips. She drew breath deeply through the filter, inhaling the cool, clean, spiced air.

'All right. Aphrinea,' she said. 'I'll be your bunny.'

Jack took her small hand between his hands. She lay back and spat the Thompsons into the bathwater.

'I always thought I'd be good at growing,' she said. 'Jasmine flowers and peppermint and chamomile. And lots of daisy weeds.'

She laughed, and reached out to put her hands on Jack's shoulders, and he helped her up. The bath drained itself. His white shirt cuffs were wet and pink. Satu steadied herself, and let him soap her and rinse her with the handheld shower.

'You can take me,' she said, looking up at him in that way. She held the edge of her lip in her teeth.

'What's that?'

'You can have me, I said. It's all right.'

She set her legs apart a little.

'O, I don't want to jinx it,' he said. 'I mean, I don't want to mess it up.'

She kissed his cheeks, and his forehead, and his temples, and ruffled his dirty hair.

'You need a wash, puppy.'

'Lift your leg.'

'Yes, master.'

'I need to wash this off.'

'Yes, master...'

She took the Thompsons from the corner of his mouth and put it in hers, sucking deeply through it, the cool spiced air. Deeper.

'A big bouncy baby,' she breathed. 'Ah... I thought I wanted a bouncy-bouncy baby boy, but I like the idea of a girl better.' She hugged him in a giggle. He was scratching at her thigh, intent. 'If it was a boy I would've called him Yack, after you, Yack. Yack Yunion! Beautiful baby Yack, little bitty Yack...'

'Leave it, will you? Lou's out there. It's one line, then we'll get out of here.'

'You're a bad sport.'

'We've got to get you gone, Sally. I need to split you out of this light. One line.'

‘Aw! I said ’em all, you’re not listening! Tell her to scat already, tell her we did this. You get it through your gone head, too. Gimme another orb.’

‘No. It’s the same line, Sally. I’ll give you five orbs when you’re done. Come on, you only dreamed you did it.’

‘Where’s *Morningcrow*?’

‘At the dock.’

‘Ready to go?’

‘All set.’

‘Got your orbs and everything?’

‘It’s all on there. You do as I say, you can have all the orbs you want till we hit Serinthea.’

‘I do as you say? Hell! You do as *I* say! Take me to bed,’ she hissed. ‘Fuck me.’

‘Lou’s waiting.’

She turned around and bent over and put her hands against the wall.

‘Now. Quick.’

Redfaced. Wet.

Jack smacked her bottom so hard his handprint welted.

‘God,’ she breathed. ‘O, God...’

He smacked her again, exactly there.

‘We’re all waiting for you,’ he said. ‘You’re holding us up.’

‘I don’t remember...’

He smacked her.

‘...the line,’ she said. Her legs were shaking. She dripped into the empty bath.

‘Once I was a girl,’ he prompted.

‘I don’t...’

He smacked her, and smacked her, and smacked her, each time the very same place. A thick, aubergine welt. His hand burned. Satu bent down and tightened the pain. The silvery drips fell from her cunt as pretty as Christmas snow.

Jack licked the little dots of blood, kissed the fingers of the wound, stood her up and held her safely in his arms and kissed her neck, kissed her shoulder, kissed behind her ear. Her hair was damp with sweat. She smelled like a mare run hard across difficult country.

‘Once I was a girl,’ he prompted.

‘Once I was a girl...’

‘...and they killed us all and I was covered...’

‘Buried,’ she breathed.

‘...in rubble and blood.’

‘...rubble and blood.’

‘Get out.’

She obeyed.

Jack towelled her dry and wrapped a white robe around her. He slapped his thigh.

‘Come.’

In a buzzing daze she followed him through the bedroom and into the living room, where Lou Destrier waited with an old field recorder strapped over her shoulder. It connected by a long cable to the antique microphone Jack used for his shows. Artificial sunlight streamed through the lace curtain, and Lou had positioned a chair where it concentrated.

‘Come,’ said Mallory, and Satu came, following her despair. They sat in the stern, glassy light.

With Dream-stained fingers, Lou painted cherry red lines across Satu’s nose, down her face and throat, down her chest. She opened the bathrobe and painted red lines from her warm, thick labia, down the insides of her thighs to her bruised knees. She held out the microphone.

The creature rolled in its burrow.

‘Once I was a girl and they killed us all,’ said Mallory, ever in horror at the memory, ‘and I was buried in rubble and blood.’

Heavy silver tears rolled down her cheeks and over her lips.

By the time this recording reached Glaz Arub, the popular story was that Satu Zertov had delivered her performance naked and painted with stripes of her own blood, while the rings of Saturn loomed into view behind the mock sun’s bare and dauntless eye. At the end of the original recording, though edited out of the studio’s clip, she is heard to disgorge a dreadful scream, before falling away from the microphone in piteous sobbing.

Some months after, at the Museum of Late Art in Hobart, Australia, Glaz Arub engineered a plum tree to grow at the centre of a square of glass shards standing up like blades. The square was bordered by a white picket fence. As each fast-growing fruit matured, its pit emitted Satu’s scream. As the plums fell and split open on the broken glass, their flesh rotted and the screaming turned to sobbing. Glaz Arub called the artwork *Personal Device*.

The one of you you thought you knew best

And when she could open her eyes again, Satu looked through a doorway into an unfamiliar room in which a legless baby grand piano hovered over three brass cups. The bathroom was where she remembered it, but it seemed brighter, or cleaner. She touched the tender lesion on her bottom, and ran the shower cold and put her head under the water, and the old vertiginous pain in her skin was what finally woke her.

If she were to choose the skill she most admired in herself, it would be that she could always perceive thresholds of change in her life. More often than not the changes themselves arrived as terrible shocks, but at least she knew when something was coming.

Anxious not to be caught out by change, she had acquired the habit of preparing a bag in anticipation of having to run for her life and begin anew. Now she put the bag beside the bed, an old leather and canvas duffel. She chose red underwear and a red bra suitable for running in. She chose a black thermal shirt and grey woollen slash-pocket pants that had been a little big for her, but now fit her growing belly. Through the belt loops she threaded a burgundy scarf, knotting it to one side like a sash. Anxiety tickled at her throat. She could smell elk in her nostrils, and another smell around them, an earthy sweetness she knew but could not quite remember. She put on a cream top, her heavy black starfighter jacket, and thick black socks with her petrol blue ankle boots.

It is hard work for the Dream addict. The fear settled in. She sat on the bed with her packed duffel at her feet, ready to run but unable to move.

‘Jack?...’

No answer. No sign of him.

When she called Lou, the connection slurred and clicked and rejected the call, then rang again on its own.

‘Satu? I can’t see you.’

But not Lou’s voice.

‘It’s me. I’m here. Lou?’

‘No, it’s me, Bahar. Satu? Where’s the vis? I came back to fly you out. Are you still at the hotel?’

‘Where... O, the Hotel Giroux! I’m here, I’m still here... Bahar!’

‘I’ve come to get you. I’ve got your ship.’

‘What ship? Where is... Bahar, where is my husband?’

‘How should I know? Gone as ever. *Morningcrow*, your ship. He gave it, I took it.’

‘He what? He *gave* it? Or you *took* it...’

‘Are you hearing bad? She won’t start up without you, she wants you.’

‘Who’s that? Jack?’

‘O, Jesus Christ... I’m coming to get you, Satu. Think about where you want to go. I’ll be at the pickup out front of your hotel at three o’clock. Three, you hear me? Three o’clock, don’t make me wait.’

The connection clicked silent.

Satu looked to the bedroom and saw Bahar come naked through the door, one of her, once Bahar, one of herselfes echoed, this youthful pirate, thin and olive-skinned, scarred, hard-muscled, a brawler, a dirty sliprunner from the old days of privateering. She too had been in the Mining Wars. She came in naked, holding her gun belt and the strange knife she kept in a scabbard at her side.

Two doors stand open, shaking.

‘Something’s lit you up all the way through,’ said Satu. *‘I always know when you’re coming home again...’*

‘What if we’d grow into old crones together?’ she heard Bahar say.

‘O, well, that’s how, that’s how she gets me, darlin’...’

‘What if our love was the fountain of youth?’ Satu heard her say. ‘I could do that for you.’

It is hard work for a Dream addict. They do not always remember. Who have you been lately? Who will become of you? Who among you will persevere?

‘O, I feel a picture of sadness every time he leaves me,’ she said in the empty elevator down to the lobby, listening to how she said it, the sentimental lilt in her voice that grated on her when she noticed it too much. It was in her writing, too, in the screenplays that she loved as she wrote them, but soon despised. ‘Fuck him,’ she snapped, and punched herself in the cheekbone, hard, hard, and once more to grow on. Take that! The sting was luscious. ‘I’ll never even look at him again. He gets gone, he shows up—fine! Who needs it? I’m a one woman woman. Be kind, angel, be kind...’ She stroked her belly. ‘Be kind, take me with you. I’ll protect you. You can’t expect people to change too much, really. I hope something *wonderful* happens to him! I don’t never want to see him, I don’t want him to break in pieces over me, but O, good Christ almighty!—he sure knows how to make a girl feel sad about herself.’

She made a gun with her fingers and held it to her head.

‘Ka-pow...’

It is hard, hard work. The one of you you thought you knew best breaks up and scatters out across the sheet of Time, and then you have to start again, come again another way.

Ready, steady... *I am not ready, I am not steady...* And now you're a mother! *A fraud!* And what can you possibly teach your child, when all you have are tricks and escapes? What wisdom can you give her? *Gestures at charm are best made swiftly.* A decisive emptiness, you. Whatever do you mean, Saturnia? Which of you did you ever think could be the mothering one? Which of you will you anoint to the task?—or shove into the searchlight and expose?

Her own mother always had a saying, an aphorism, something decisive to cast at her:

Saturnia, leave the horse to run, don't kill it for the sake of carrying you.

Ah, but whatever do you mean, mother? Whatever do you *mean*? What fucking horse, Saturnia?

Your problem, she sneered into herself, is that you let everything go on far too long. Too many people have their willy-nilly ways with you, and you just go on letting it happen. Come to your senses!

'Return often and take me, my love.'

Return often and take me, wrote the poet Cavafy; Satu remembered being read his work, by whom? Not Jack; Bahar? Certainly, surely—beautiful, cultured, brave, defiant Bahar, the pirate poet...

Ah! Now she... now Bahar, above all, is the one who does not strive to command the tides of Time, Saturnia. No, no, but she permits them to carry her out and return her at their will, anywhen and anywhere, certain that certainty can never save her. And so never was she found, nor taught, nor redeemed, beloved Bahar, God forbid!—but by briefer meetings varied into something surer, persevering, carried back and out again in heedless Time. And with each return, for longer and longer you see that she remains as

whole and unbound as when she left, Bahar herself, alone, unbroken, her goldgrey light
a pale featherweight in the waves.

HOW SWEET THE SILENT BACKWARD TRACINGS

Little Miss Song 'n' Dance

Her name *ESCRIVA* a faded black stencil on the knockabout duffel bag, and below it her assignment code *EN220D1 EVANDER*, added by a robot whose hammered metal face Marieta had taken as a warning of discomforts to come. Entertainer 220, pharmagrade D1, patrol ship *Evander*. They gave her a shrinkwrapped block of fifty packs of Thompsons Field Filter Breathing Aides, and a plastic card good for one hundred bottles of Lysodol, the venerable lys pill, so-called Fountain of Youth, *Heals your woes from head to toes! It's Lyso Lyso Lysodol!*

It is hard work for a Dream addict. Lysodol won't cut it. Marieta sat through an excruciating infocom about the danger of exceeding prescription doses, before being informed that her mandated dose was three times the standard recommendation. For the first time in many months she found her smile. A thousand times the dose wouldn't fill her Dream void, though sometimes if you'd break them open and quickly snort the lys before it dissipated, you'd go on a little way, but she preferred to believe she was above that sort of gutter hack.

When she picked up her Lysodol, she found they were not the familiar little blue pills, but hard, chalky pebbles. Holding one left a sticky white residue on her fingers. In the mess hall she crushed a pill between two spoons, producing a claggy grit. She snorted a pinch and sneezed eight times in a row.

'Goad bless yuh,' said the stringy blond soldier across the table. 'It don't make nothin' for snuff, but I can gain yuh that if it's wanted. Cocaine is what I mean. I don't mind sayin' it out loud, no one in this army seems responsible fer givin' a shit.'

‘Well that’s all about to change,’ said Marieta, ‘as I am an inspector with the Bureau of Pharmaceutical Control. Tell me more about this cocaine. Are you the ringleader of this little scheme?’

‘Ah, I don’t... I didn’t... Ah-hee!’

The soldier abandoned his meal tray and scrambled away.

It seemed to Marieta, picking through the dust the Lysodol pebble made, that the International Legion’s recipe was a powdered lys substitute, perhaps some kind of cheap antipsychotic, and a light filler. Not much for snuff, no, but if others on *Evander* took the stuff, willingly or fearfully, they’d likely need more because it was so weak. We live in hope, Marieta.

It is hard work for a Dream addict. She was choosy, she took Dream if she could get it pure enough, but never touched opiates, never drank much alcohol, never touched tobacco. She used Thompsons filters if the air was bad, or to soothe anxiety, or when she was very tired and had to stay awake. Thompsons Alexandria, fragrant and deliciously spiced. When she could get them, she would keep them in an old metal cigarette case engraved with a line from a poem by C.P. Cavafy: *Return often and take me...*

She had only a few Alexandrias left, so she hid the metal case in the pouch inside her guitar case, and put a pack of the Thompsons Field Filters in her pocket. Field Filters had no flavour, no fragrance, no spice, all they did was filter the air, though seven minutes of clean air was a godsend out in deep space. Grinding through years of recycled air on a starship, seven minutes of Thompsons air might just pep you enough to get you through another day. O, but Marieta sure did love those Alexandrias, what other personal filter could beat them? She had tried Goliath, Fyodor, Laszlo, even

Esprit de Corps, the thicker filters made especially for the *Légion étrangère*, the French Foreign Legion, which still operated in the rougher backwaters of our settled systems. She always came back to her Alexandrias.

O, Marieta! Marieta, dear Marieta...

What she wanted was her ship back, *Morningcrow*, wherever he was, somewhere out in this patrol fleet, she knew. She had made use of her conscription to the Legion wisely enough: get scooped up, get inducted, pay up a little here, a little there, and get dispatched to where ol' *Crow* had cast his last faint beacon back to her. Middle of nowhere, but so be it. All she wanted was her ship back, and she'd pack the cargo hold with food and water and pallets of Thompsons Alexandrias and soar away into the wide black sea.

Losing *Morningcrow* was her chief regret. Conscription wasn't much better. Resourcing security operations out in deep space with conscripts was an age-old racket, and like jury duty every name comes up sooner or later. You're just unlucky if you're still around when it does. Thus Marieta became a Sentient Resource, that precious euphemism for cannon fodder, aboard the patrol cruiser *Evander*, which sailed the great yawn of d-space alongside its sibling cruisers *Ambrose* and *Terrapin*. The International Legion, the combat arm of the Allied Faith, patrolled and protected mining leases and infrastructure, slipstream gates, and the fleets of giant extractor mechs. The Legion's work was a shuffle up from prison labour, it's hard work keeping a Dream body when you're piloting an eighty-ton Legion mech to inspect and triage thirty thousand astromech miners, one by one, after an Epir raid. Hard goddamn work.

Leaving the great multiplex cities of Earth to decay full of starving, homeless, unemployed bodies is no advertisement for the charitable governance of the Allied

Faith superstructure, so the conscription racket was devised and set loose to scoop up all those hapless forms, jag them out to faraway fleets, and keep them moving and productive. A little food and water, and the magic pill, Lysodol, *It's Lysodol, Lysodol, with Lys for Life!* That damn song! Marieta was with Jack Clune the morning he sat down at the piano, hungover and late to deliver his commission, and made it up in two minutes flat. *Lysodol, Lysodol, Lyso Lyso Lysodol...* A mindless jingle broadcast all over the Earthside planets. He did not always remember.

Marieta knew well that all these Shanghai'd conscripts like her were fixed out here for life or death to the Allied Faith. The only other option was to escape, find a friendly ship and get gone, but for that kind of crime you needed the cooperation of a shipboard AI that really knew you, one you could trust with your life, as much as any AI could be trusted so far. *Morningcrow* was just that ship for Marieta Escrivea.

So dig deep, she told herself, and search on, and do your EN220D1 duty tinkling the teeth of shabby, out of tune pianos for the officers. You're the entertainer, Little Miss Song 'n' Dance. Maybe you'll play your guitar in serious mode from time to time, to get yourself known, to find yourself invited to Captain's table, or even Captain's quarters, should the mood seize you, and why not? All good sport, Marieta. But keep close watch for your sweetheart, your starship lover, watch close and pay attention. There's always a thread, as Ariadne said, for a bullish individual to find.

And meanwhile might you not get something in exchange for all that Lysodol? A box of Dream, or a box of Alexandrias? Maybe, maybe, and meanwhile, Marieta, keep your head down, keep your search up, keep your little whiskers twitching.

O, Marieta, Marieta! Willful, brave, impatient and tenacious, her music both her own and her father's, these pieces from his songbook *Musica de la Familia Escrivea*,

and her memories composed of fragments held over from her life and from Aux, echoes still clear, in the remnant hollow in her brain, of the world that Aux had left behind for her to dwell in. And this ungovernable sadness that she carried like a dying organ, her pound of the Escriva family demon, she held close and never spoke of. It was a mute grey thing she and her father carried tucked under the silence in their souls. After Aux, lelks from all the Dream seeped in to line the hollow and the sadness both, to protect and cherish them, and so Marieta too gave lelks right of way to her heart.

Scavenging, thieving, sneaking

A recurring nightmare: she cannot work the programmatic demands of the postal system so as to retrieve a letter sent to her, a personal letter containing an offer of marriage which will expire if she does not RSVP.

Loneliness is obliterating her.

She seized awake and put a hand to the stem gun nestled in its holster in the pocket of her sleeping capsule.

Evander's massive, purring engines choked and throbbed and stopped.

The stem gun warmed to her touch, this poor dumb monster whose bio-disruptive ejaculations were both gentler and more lethal than the metal slugs of a vintage sidearm. It was a living thing, she was supposed to bond with it, keep it with her, treat it like a pet, a pal, and the little gun would learn to protect her. Their relationship was tetchy. The gun appeared to feel her neglect.

The hatch of her sleeping capsule unlocked and opened onto the corridor between the rows of identical capsules. *Evander* was silent, and dark but for the orange emergency lights illuminating paths to the main thoroughfares. Capsule after capsule breathed open. Sleepy conscripts leaned out.

'What is it?' a boy said.

'The engine,' said his neighbour.

A bone-quivering thud passed through the hull and threw Marieta against the capsule wall. The emergency lights flickered. An upswell of chatter, calls for help:

'Med! Med!'

Marieta was trying to hear the faint noise that had started up behind the ruckus. The stem gun's thin red tongue reached out and licked her hand and wrapped around her wrist.

The noise grew into a grinding sneer, while beneath them, deep but close, a loud metallic scraping cut along *Evander's* hull.

Her blood froze. She knew the sound: Epir, none other. An Epir boarding party.

'Abandon ship!' she cried out with delight, and slid down the ladder to the deck and skipped to the end of the corridor. A hulking cyborg stepped into her path, dressed in a matte black uniform and black balaclava, his eyes augmented gunmetal blue.

'Hello, handsome,' said Marieta. 'What's the game?'

'*Abandon ship,*' said the cyborg.

'From who? Epir? It must be.'

'*Abandon ship or die.*'

'Well that's no way to make friends...'

A clutch of younger conscripts hovered behind her, shocked and uncertain.

'Go to B-Level,' Marieta said over her shoulder, backing away from the cyborg.

'It's Epir again. Get to a pod, abandon ship.'

'Who's that speaking?' someone said. 'Who are you to give orders?'

'What's Epir?'

'Move!' said Marieta. 'Get gone!'

'What's Epir?' said the skinny kid swinging her legs over the side of the capsule beside Marieta's. 'What's all the big action?'

Marieta fixed the kid with a hard stare. Bright silver eyes in a heart-shaped face looked back at her. Lys eyes, lys for blood, and the body of a youth, almost flat-chested.

‘What’re you, Tauran?’ asked Marieta. ‘What are you doing all the way out here? You trying to pass for Earthling? Get gone, little one. Epir has come, the starhunters. This goes on all over, and never ends well.’

‘I’ll never be no Earthling,’ said the kid. ‘They swiped me off a cloud crew out at Venus! I’m not supposed to be here.’

‘What’re you wailing about?’

‘I shouldn’t be here, that’s what,’ said the kid. ‘Not on this jag here.’

‘Why you? Why not? We all shouldn’t be here, but there’s Death come for us now, child.’

‘They don’t have a right to swipe a Tauran, that’s what I want to say. But you don’t think I know Epir? I know more than you, more than any of you. Get me on the hot ship, mistress, I’m good for machines, I got brains. Not just a pretty face, me.’

‘Not even. Scram, pest.’

‘Awp! Don’t go now, mistress, I can see where you’re thinking. Take me with you. I’m helpful in any world.’

‘Say why, then,’ said Marieta. ‘What use are you?’

‘Scavenging, thieving, sneaking... what else? What else is there? I can get anything flying, mistress. Anything, that’s my line. Not that there was much left to scav in the Earthling settlements, you burn it all when you jag, don’t you? What a dump, Venus! Goddess of trash. I tried to scav from the cloud cities, but null. I got snatched! A Tauran, me!’

‘Get gone, child. You’re all babble.’

Marieta climbed up to her capsule and took her leather necklace and the stem gun’s shoulder holster from the pouch in her hatch, then lifted the mattress and pulled from the recess her guitar case with its padded backpack harness.

The Tauran was sulky and gathering her own things. It all fit in her pockets, just trinkets and keys.

‘Take your stem gun,’ said Marieta.

‘It won’t use me, I’m not Earthling enough. Get that? Not Earth enough for this army. I could throw it at someone, maybe. You hear that scraping noise, mistress? Hear how there’s one behind it? Scratching, scratching...’

‘I hear.’

‘That noise is the wrecking crew. They ain’t Epir, these are mercenaries. Epir take you prisoner, these ones skin you for kicks. Maybe Epir comes after them, but the vermin come first. Get out now or die in misery, klar? That’s the signal?’

‘That’s it. Abandon ship.’

‘Die in misery,’ she said, showing flat yellow teeth. ‘I like that. Where’s your ship?’

‘That’s what I’d like to know.’

‘You’re looking for a certain special someone, I can help. I can work the flood, me. I’m stronger’n I look, too.’

She was silvery saucer-eyed. Her voice had a desperate edge. Marieta felt such a rush of sadness on the kid’s behalf, like a premonition, and after it came the faint vis of thousands of yellow flowers dying in a wide meadow, drying out and set aflame.

‘All right, listen up. First and foremost, we are looking for a Claremont Corso. The ship is called *Morningcrow*, just that one, I don’t want any other. I’ve been all over creation looking for this kid. What’s your name?’

‘I’ll ask the big board,’ said the Tauran. ‘*Morningcrow*... she’ll pour it out to me.’

‘What do I call you when I want you to shut up and listen?’

‘Me? O, Aberdeen Cloud, that’s fine. I already know who you are, I listen to your papa’s music. I must’ve seen your show a dozen times.’

‘All right, all right. Help me get gone, I’ll play for you.’

‘*A crew more than two-o-o...*’

‘That’s Jack Clune’s shitty lounge version, give me a break.’

Aberdeen Cloud laughed bright and high. She sang another few lines. Marieta put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed hard and she stopped singing. She pushed Aberdeen Cloud ahead of her to the thoroughfare, an elevated metal runway. The Tauran was light, her limbs were thin, she pushed easily, and once she got the idea she danced on ahead. Maybe the kid would take death for her, Marieta wondered—was it Taurans who lived five lives? Maybe she had one to spare.

Aberdeen Cloud, pointing, said, ‘Midship,’ and ran off down the runway, dodging gracefully through a glut of bewildered conscripts whose emergency training was an infocom they had fallen asleep in. Marieta shoved her way through. Black clad Heavy Drop Unit cyborgs stood at intersections between the runway and the sleeping capsule corridors, waiting for something, neither stopping nor helping anyone.

Somewhere out there, Marieta knew, was a huge black lozenge of a battleship, orbit-locked to *Evander*, *Ambrose*, and *Terrapin*: the HDU transport. HDU cyborgs are, it is said, more shadow than body: a single consciousness, dispersed among armoured

remnant shells of Vellem shapeshifters, directed by a manifold sentient cortex, their near-god AI, sprawled across star systems and powered by the scattered fleet of HDU ships.

Marieta jogged after Aberdeen Cloud, dodging and shoving her way to the midship observation deck. O, Marieta, Marieta!—ever ready for the chance to run, ever ready for a fight! Her guitar thudded into shoulders and heads as she pushed through the crowd. The evac alarm wailed. Aberdeen Cloud led them to the midship deck and out under the broad observation dome where the conscripts were gathering.

Through the great dome they could see a ragged slipstream wayhole spreading open in an ashen glow. Marieta and Aberdeen Cloud had seen Epir wayholes before, and they all looked just like this one. Its light was muddy, dirty, lacking the elegance of a Johir wayhole. Its edge shivered against the darkness. Its aperture stammered as if in torment. Out past Serinthea, choirs of Johir engineers ease open the skin of spacetime with sympathy and grace; the Epir wayhole was a murky, intemperate split, spacetime crudely scraped aside and filled with lys. Its silvery edge streaked and swirled and crabbed.

With a dense pulsation, the wayhole emitted a violent, bulging flare and spilled over its edge in a pink wave toward *Evander*. Marieta had seen wayholes burst their gates before, she knew well the way a dazzling horde of lelks appear in this world. They are here. There is nothing to be done. They are here, and all is come, or all is lost.

Lelk struck the ship and strained through its hull, and all sound sucked at once from siren and speaker and mouth. All light evaporated. Dazzling lelks came through the walls and swarmed across the deck and through all forms, all matter.

Two doors stand open, waiting.

The deck lit up again. Alarms stammered. Screams returned and snapped away. The conscripts on the observation deck stood mute with terror, staring up through the dome. A fleet of ships came through the wayhole, tearing the light behind them into mottled streaks.

‘Marieta!’

Lelk worked in her, clarifying, but she could not enfold with them, could not fit to their purpose. The hollow Aux had left in her brain resisted them, and they did not approach it. Even now Aux was her protector. The hollow stayed raw, unfilled, yearning.

‘Marieta, here!’

She heard the kid, but couldn’t see her in the pressing crowd.

‘Where are you?’

‘I’m here! This way!’

Now Marieta saw her, not far, waving from behind a clutch of bickering gunners. Overhead, motley starfighters streamed in a shimmer from the Epir wayhole and snapped into shape as they cleared it, trailing lelks in threads like spiders on their silk.

In the hollow in her mind she remembered other names. She does not always remember, but these came to her, and she could see them now, Claremont Corsos she had once flown, borrowed, stolen. Their AIs might remember her, might yet like her well enough to save her neck.

‘Three ships,’ she yelled to Aberdeen Cloud, holding up three fingers. ‘Look for *Joan*, *Hevelius*, or *Morningcrow*,’ and she repeated the names, these other ships. She wanted *Morningcrow* more than any other.

Aberdeen Cloud held her arms up to the dome like an augur. Raw dataflood vis was leaking from the big screen and drizzling to the deck in a messy tangle. Through a handheld terminal, Aberdeen Cloud funnelled the flood vis to inlets in her wrists. The big screen was cycling fast through a list of active starfighters on *Evander*.

A second dense, glottal pulse swept through the ship, and from the feral wayhole flowed the nose of a colossal Jirqo'adai destroyer. *Death*, its name burned in enormous black letters into its silver hull. *Death*, the starhunter.

The destroyer was far more massive than *Evander*. It emerged from the wayhole in articulated segments, a fearsome, looping serpent rearing above the Epir fleet. From its belly shot forth wing after wing of starfighters and skeletal drones. Now a huge bronze nanoid shield swarmed out and curved around the International Legion fleet, swamping *Evander*, *Ambrose*, and *Terrapin*. Starfighter hangars slid open like gills in the cruisers' flanks, and fighters burst from them, each bearing the blue circle insignia of the Legion. Heavy Drop Unit operatives jetted from the topmost deck of *Evander*, streaking out into the gulf between it and the Epir destroyer.

A hail came over *Evander*'s loudspeakers, a fractured metallic voice:

'Surrender to Epir.'

The Legion pilots swarmed toward *Death*, the Jirqo'adai destroyer, as a milky shield spilled from the gigantic ship and smeared out across the Epir fleet. As the Epir fighters cut through it, the shield gave way and healed behind them. The darkness dashed with gold and scarlet artillery bolts, grey shards and shatterings from ice guns. Epir cannons barraged the Legion's shield with laser cannon bolts and tungsten javelins.

Above them *Death* tremored, and from its vast neck emitted a pair of whale-thick ion bolts that streaked across the milky black divide and splattered into the Legion's

shield, shivering and dissolving it in ragged patches. Nanoids scattered from the broken shield like clouds of ash while loop-wing mercenary gunships, darting from behind *Death*, angled through the cracks. Two bronze Claremont Archers shot from the wayhole, sailing gracefully side by side, joined by a mist of crimson light and trailing spittlethreads of lelkh.

A rain of data inside *Evander*'s observation dome: fleet estimates, ship categories, a running list of active starfighters and their positions, heat maps, artillery estimates, all jumbles and splashed over the walls and floors, over Marieta and Aberdeen Cloud. The hollow in Marieta's mind where Aux once dwelled had filled with throbbing pain. Light dragged and trembled to her. Across the deck, Aberdeen was holding up her terminal, and into it flowed tendrils of the mutilated dataflood. From the terminal they threaded into conduits in her arms, and the terminal shone a slit of amber light that jittered into her eyes.

'J-Deck!' she called out. 'I've got her!'

Marieta watched the two bronze Archers come clear from the garbled vis. She thought she recognised one, its hull, the custom bronze bolesura that looked for all the world like what Sem Morrow was making, back in the day. He used to work on Corsos out at Bombay Beach...

In a moment the Archers were gone again. Aberdeen Cloud hurried over.

'I've got your ship, mistress. J-Deck.'

'Which one?'

'*Morningcrow*, right?'

Marieta's heart skipped. Real love is rare and precious.

'You're sure? Here?'

‘Sure! J-Deck.’

‘What about those two bronze Archers?’

‘O, I saw them too, and plenty others,’ said Aberdeen Cloud. ‘You name it.’

‘*You* name it.’

‘What name you want? *Alecto*, says one, and the bound twin *Amata*. That bind is Arcturan, mistress! It’s heavy light.’

‘That cord?’

‘Heavy light, bad light.’

Aberdeen Cloud held out the amber holo gleaming from her handheld terminal. It displayed *Evander*’s registry, names of ships with H for Home and A for Away:

Longspur J1-12 H

Marguerite J1-13 A

Patricia J1-14 A

Opis J1-15 A

Morningcrow J1-16 H

‘Hangar,’ said Marieta. ‘J-Hangar, there’s no J-Deck. Bay sixteen...’

‘*Alecto*,’ Aberdeen Cloud announced, pointing at the glutinous flood vis. It smeared away, resistant.

‘What’s it say? Who’s the pilot?’

‘Ouranos Byre. Well, everyone knows who that is.’

‘The other ship,’ said Marieta. ‘The twin. What crew does it show?’

‘No data, just joined to *Alecto*. That there is heavy, heavy light, mistress. Let’s get long gone, no good comes of us meeting that beam.’ Aberdeen Cloud shook the little terminal and detached the thread of vis from her arm. ‘You’ll take me with you now, right? I can hitch on this *Morningcrow* of yours? I was never meant to be here...’

Marieta put her hand around the kid’s neck and pulled her close.

‘You can come, but if you try and jinx me, any which way, I’ll kill you.’

‘I do believe, mistress.’

‘If we get split up,’ said Marieta, ‘I’ll wait for you till I run out of patience. I run out of patience pretty damn fast.’

‘I won’t split, I won’t!’

Marieta took her hand away. A bright sheen rippled silver swift across Aberdeen Cloud’s face, and her eyes blushed pink, and quick as a flash she unzipped her flight suit and shrugged it to her hips, pulled its arms around her waist, and knotted them beneath her lilac breasts. With a grimace of pain she unfolded a pair of powerful lacewings from her back, their wide yellow birthmarks speckled pink with lelk. Flexing and stretching the wings to their full span, she nodded to Marieta and took off at a low flying run, out of the observation deck and down the corridor toward the hangars. All bodies dodged and dove from her path, and Marieta ran delighted in her wake.

The remnant hollow

Minutes to go.

Once, Marieta Escriva had been *Morningcrow*'s keeper. No one ever truly owned that ship. Some vessels could not be owned, would not offer themselves, might even change their AI for every keeper. *Morningcrow* did not change for Marieta. He went on growing into the wild beast he wished to be, a beast in the shape of a Claremont Corso, an ancient being, ever more adventurous and disdainful of non-existence, the opaque human fear he had inherited long ago from his manufacturer.

The ship came to Marieta scorched and battered, but fully operative, and slipworthy. She lived onboard for months, getting to know the AI, without so much as a test launch, and came to know *Morningcrow* as male, although its current active memory was an aggregate derived from the minds of former women pilots. Marieta added herself to them, gaining the AI's confidence, and she felt the companionship toward which *Crow* seemed oriented by design.

It was curious to Marieta that the AI dismissed his male owners and keepers, and perhaps even lied to her about them. According to the log, he had last been owned by the notorious pirate Sordamor. It was a brief affair, but one *Morningcrow* prioritised. It seemed to illuminate his sense of place among the hierarchies of human worlds.

Quickwitted and wily, delicately sly, transformed by his participation with Sordamor, *Morningcrow* welcomed Marieta with a detailed map of old pirate slipstream wayholes, compiled with Sordamor. The map showed slipstream physics at its limit: wayholes wrapped around wayholes, shortcuts through wayhole walls, routes past blockades and taxation fleets, past the International Legion, the Allied Faith, Epir.

It is hard work for a Dream addict, keeping a body. To trade Aux for a ship that would just carry her awhile, carry her from Dream to Dream, seemed to Marieta the kind of relief she deserved at her age. The freelance surgeon Jack Clune hired to extract her Aux had performed the difficult procedure well enough, but Aux, unseated, left behind an aching hollow in Marieta's mind. In the hollow she could still hear Aux, though no more clearly now than all the other voices in her head. Worn out in Dream, Marieta moved onto *Morningcrow*, bringing her few possessions and a large cargo of Aphrinea Dream to sustain her and leaven the pain of her body's inability to die.

It is hard work.

The hollow Aux left in Marieta's mind had the unpleasant effect of increasing her tolerance for Dream. *En route* across the Sol system, she orbbed her cargo faster than she ever had before. Trouble came after her, but she always did enjoy a bit of trouble, as long as there was Dream to ease the burden of her constant shimmering pain and its attendant despair. When she ran out of orbs, she had to turn her scheming mind again to how she'd steal more. Partial to theft as a hobby, Marieta's problem was her lack of better judgement: she stole from the wrong people, the most petty and unforgiving. For a long time she didn't realise a wrecking crew was after her. *Morningcrow* did not relay the information.

It is a curious experience to sail with an elusive AI, one that concerns itself with an agenda it keeps from its pilot. It is somewhat dehumanising, at best a kind of blindness. A ship who has sailed with numerous pilots, with a certain Aux implanted and reimplanted between these different bodies, can develop a way of seeing the universe that is not altogether communicable or comprehensible in human terms. This is less a problem of relative intelligence than of the materials of communication available to the

pilot and the AI. When the human pilot reaches the limits of language, for example, the AI readily endures, creating new languages for itself, or in union with its companion Aux. It may be in the pilot's best interests not to perceive or understand completely. By the time the wrecking crew caught up with *Morningcrow*, following along a timeline smeared out every which way by all his looping through Sordamor's slipstream, Marieta was gone, now sailing a Claremont Archer, this ship older and faster and even more devious than *Morningcrow*.

With the Archer, Marieta orb'd a lot of Dream, and stole plenty, and smuggled and sold a good deal more. Out in the salt asteroids beyond Jugur, she slipped away from the wrecking crew one last time, sailing *Amata* in a jaunty arc into the oldest wayhole on Sordamor's map. By and by she found herself in the Ursu system, where she went to Csin and embarked on an intense sexual affair with a drifting strand of Zsk.

And loneliness grew ever deeper through her body, and her sadness and despair laid her down upon the warm inviting tongue of her family demon, and little by little she succumbed to Aux's remnant hollow, its pervasive disappointment. Solitary and smeared out among the stars, she longed and strove to turn the transient toward the lasting, she longed to set herself aside from Dream and die. Radiance of the unknown became her measuring map, her scale and spectrum. She poured herself anew through galaxies. In every world she left another of herself, lived thoroughly to dust. And yet ever it returns, desire for life, stern and required, and who can resist? Who among us is more daring than consciousness?

Her little enemy

Aberdeen Cloud barged through the throng, wings spread wide and chasing all aside. Blast doors thudded shut throughout *Evander*, and Aberdeen Cloud was taking such a convoluted path to the hangars that Marieta lost track of where they were. The pain grew in her joints and skin. Sirens lalled around her. The ruptured dataflood flowed down the walls in sheets of strangled vis and text, one wall drenched in error signals, the other a jittering stream of the battle with Epir. *Thud, thud*, the blast doors, one by one, *thud, thud*, nearer and nearer.

Marieta turned a corner and plunged down a wider corridor. Up ahead, Aberdeen Cloud folded her wings and sailed through the wide blast doors at the end of the corridor, the letter *J* painted in bright orange on the left door, the number *1* on the right. Jumbled, viscous flood vis swamped the corridor, a rising tide.

The hangar doors rumbled and shook and began to close. *Evander* rattled and screeched, lights and control panels burst, sparking and sputtering. Aberdeen Cloud appeared between the doors, a lilac halo emanating from her chest and throat. Setting herself between them, she extended her wings and held the heavy doors open for Marieta. Pain contorted her small face. Her lilac halo intensified. One wing shuddered awfully and crimped and buckled, and the sharp crack as it broke echoed briefly in the corridor. Aberdeen Cloud screamed. The wing slumped like a broken sail. Yet she did not relent, and raised it again, her face ashen, her throat and chest glowing deep violet, and with a dreadful moan she heaved once more against the doors.

Please...

In the stuttering dataflood vis slopping down the wall, Marieta saw the Archers, *Alecto* and its twin, converge in a shock of bronze light.

Marieta!

The floor bubbled with lelkh, and the walls and air bubbled, pink lelkh rushing through *Evander*, clamouring after encounters, after communion with other bodies. Marieta felt a thick wave swell behind her. She braced herself to be swept along in it. And pain flowered in her skin as lelkh touched her, such vivid burning bright blue pain, and it sank through her and spilled into the hollow in her mind. She could feel ghosts pressing through the passages lelkh made in her, straining to depart this world—*I'm here! I'm here!*—and the wave of lelkh swelled up and lifted her along the corridor toward a glutinous sheet of vis that showed *Alecto* and its twin, wing to wing, atomise and slip inside one another.

A dazzling scythe of bronze light cut across the void. With a violent tremor *Evander's* core stabilisers cut out, and the great ship listed to starboard. The bronze light, stern and loud, swept through the ship and along the corridor, knocking Marieta sprawling into the surge of lelkh.

Move!

The bronze light pressed her down into the lelkh beneath a slick of dataflood vis. Lelkh speckled her face and warbled in her skin. Just above, she could see the lumpen bronze form of *Alecto* and the other, merged into an almost fleshy vessel, a momentary brilliance before it vanished into darkness. Aberdeen Cloud's hand thrust down through the vis, through the lelkh, and seized Marieta's arm.

I always know when you're coming home again...

Lelkh raised her to Aberdeen Cloud's embrace, singing in the hollow in her head.

We turned 'round the Green Grove carousel, when we were too young to know what love takes away...

And in the hollow again and just like old times she saw visions of happenings not yet happened, still coming, becoming. Aux was long gone, but still its remembrances rushed through her. It is hard work for the Dream addict. She sank down in memory, her little enemy, and the hollow dragged young minds through her. She remembered sins and degradations, her uses and her victims, and she saw a wrecking crew at the edge of every vision, mercenaries pursuing not only her, but all the others Aux had been with, or else pursuing Aux itself. Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps. Millions of Auxes rotted in the sun on the Martian plain, in the dump outside of Tereshkova where all the used up and deranged grey matter of the Nanocene was abandoned. What became of all that understanding? The knowledge of millions of Auxes? What became of all their data? Information cannot hide. Even the planets themselves, old and full of days, will vanish from their places only to come again, elsewhere, another way. In the midst of life we are in death.

The Epir wayhole, elongated like a tongue, was choking out a gigantic, bilious grey orb. Marieta saw it in the vis. She felt herself lifted. The orb expelled itself from the wayhole, clarifying, shining silvery behind the Epir fleet, and thus fulfilled in this world, all at once it flashed black, clouded over like a cataract, and shattered into countless stonelike shards.

Marieta! Marieta!

Dear darling Marieta, bubbled with lel, bubbled in her mind, in the hollow, in her organs, her nerves and skin.

Aberdeen Cloud hauled her from the mire of lelk and vis, one strong hand around her waist while the other pulled forth the guitar case still strapped to Marieta's back. She pulled her across the floe of lelk, across its clotted surface, and through the hangar doors, wedged open by the hardening floe inflected with old lelk and fragments of dataflood vis. Inside the cavernous hangar, lelk foamed pinkly over every surface and floated like snow in the air. The air was thin but breathable. What glorious beauty runs upon fat streams of life that carve the valleys of endurance in your mind! Lelk swarmed to Marieta, burrowing through her clothes and into her skin, and raised her and pressed her onward, hand in hand with Aberdeen Cloud. The Tauran's broken wing dragged behind her.

'*Morningcrow*,' said Marieta, pointing at the Claremont Corso on the far side of the hangar. As if in greeting, the ship's boarding lift slid down to the deck. 'Come on, kid. *Crow* has a real surgical interest, you'll be fixed up in no time.'

'I'm done, me...'

Whistle while you dream, send your troubles faraway

'You got too much lelk in you, mistress. I can hear your thoughts so clear it's like my own.'

Marieta pulled Aberdeen Cloud into the boarding lift and helped her haul in the broken wing. The lilac at her throat was gone, she had no colour. Holding the wing gently, Marieta punched the big button and the lift withdrew into *Morningcrow*, and the lelk that had shrunk watchfully away came out and crept in a pink mist across the deck. The lift docked and they stepped into the airlock.

Stowing her battered guitar in the gun rack, Marieta led Aberdeen Cloud up to the bridge, and to the rear gangway that led back through the ship to the utility rooms, the galley and mess room, and the medical bay.

‘Straight down to med,’ she said, pointing. ‘Last door on the right. I’ll start the launch sequence and come back and check on you. Go on, quick!’

But Aberdeen Cloud was shaking her head, watching the stream of status checks and calculations flowing down *Morningcrow*’s big screen.

‘That’s heavy light, mistress. That’s real heavy starlight. I know that light, it’ll swallow us up.’

Behind them the door to the gangway slid shut and sealed.

‘I’ve been all over,’ said Aberdeen Cloud. ‘I’ve seen that light bring disaster. It’s coming now, it’s coming, I can see it.’

Marieta stepped to the gangway door and tried to get the panel working.

‘Open the door, *Crow*!’

‘Yes, mistress, that’s what it is, that’s heavy light. Lay aside the weight of darkness, that’s what you’ve got left, right there. All the light between this and nothin’, there’s not much of it, but heavy, heavy...’

Aberdeen Cloud held her shoulder and dragged the limp wing down to the navigation pit. Slumped into the navigator’s seat, she laid her hand on the dataflood transfer pad and watched vis of the battle in her optic receptors. The ragged wayhole glowed fiercely, pitted with voids. The International Legion was all but routed.

‘Maybe one clear shot,’ she muttered. ‘That’s all, if I can even figure it.’

Morningcrow’s AI came clear and close in Marieta’s head:

We must wait.

What? What the hell for?

Amata.

Who? Open the med bay, Crow...

Amata comes. We must receive her.

Who the hell is that? When did you get so bossy?

Be ready, Marieta.

A ripple in the darkness registered on the big screen, a shape barely distinct against the painted light of the wayhole. The shape shifted and varied, unfolded and refolded.

‘Heavy light,’ Aberdeen Cloud called from the pit. ‘I’m telling you...’

The light of Aufrinius. Wait.

‘I wait for no one,’ Marieta muttered, and she stomped to the pilot’s console and laid her hand to the panel. An amber scanline searched her palm and face, and all systems winked into life.

Wait for Amata.

Aberdeen Cloud opened wide her lys-shot eyes and pulled herself forward to trace a Tauran hex on the nav panel. *Morningcrow* knew the hex series, but could not accept the passage the hex proposed. Aberdeen Cloud traced the hex again with *terälehteä* around it, the flowering ensign of Terälehtiset traders, and added a private hex within one of the petals. Some things cannot be forgotten. *Morningcrow* remembered. Aux too remembered, in the strange hollow it occupied in the ship’s sentience.

A chart blossomed from the holodec, a torus-shaped map of convoluted routes through the slipstream, run through with bright lines in many colours, and contorted curves and loops. Aberdeen Cloud turned the map until she found a kinked curve that passed over the inward surface of the torus and ended in a stammering green dot. She

stretched the map and pulled it through its own core, and stretched it out once more, the green dot at her fingertips.

Marieta stood at her side. She put her hand on the Tauran's good shoulder.

'Nice moves, kid. More than I could ever learn.'

'This is the way we want,' said Aberdeen Cloud, spinning the elaboration a fraction closer, indicating the green dot with the thin green line bending away from it.

'And the whole Epir fleet in our way,' said Marieta.

We must wait for Amata.

'No other as stable,' said Aberdeen Cloud. 'What does the ship say?'

'Nothing useful.' Marieta pointed at a pale blue line. 'Where's that one take us? I think I know it.'

'That's the Earthward jag. Comes out at your Venus, thereabouts. But this is Terälehtimään, they don't go all the way to Earth.'

'Where'd you get this chart?'

Amata comes.

'You know Terälehti, mistress? This one is theirs, I made my way through that world as a pilot. They are genius temporal engineers, better than Johir, and more quiet, you know? Under everyone's perception. They travel here, now, even right here, I swear it. We never pay attention their way, but there's always someone passing through.'

'Fairy tale creatures, bipeds with flowers for skin... sure I know them. Tall tales go a long way.'

Aberdeen Cloud looked up at the Earthling's dark-eyed worry.

‘They traded with Venus for thousands of years, mistress, long ago when there were more worlds of peace and beauty than of war. Then they went home. Is this what you want?’

Marieta nodded.

‘I’m very tired of being pulled through time,’ she said.

‘And through all those voices,’ said Aberdeen Cloud. ‘I can hear them all muddled, mistress, I do hear ’em. Let’s take the other way, then. One way’s as good as another. Will you take me with you? All I want, for my part, is to quit being so alone all the time. I got uses, mistress.’

Marieta bent and kissed Aberdeen Cloud on the cheek.

‘You’re a treasure, kid. You know that?’

‘Ah, mistress! Treasure in a cold box, lost treasure, sunken treasure...’

In a lilac blush, Aberdeen Cloud turned the torus and elaborated the pale blue line.

‘Venus is close enough,’ said Marieta. ‘I’ll go on from there.’

‘Aye-aye and done, mistress. We’ll go on. One way or another, we end up going home. One home’s as good as another.’

Morningcrow’s engines and thrusters powered up as Aberdeen Cloud set the course. Marieta felt their cool, smooth rumble in her heart like a rush of love. Added to the engines were sounds she remembered from long ago, younger adventures: the ice cannon tanks filling with grey water and racking into place, the pleasant distant crackle of tungsten spears loading and locking into the kinetic cannons.

On the big screen, *Morningcrow* showed vis of a huge, manyfaced, bronze-edged hedron that was shivering apart and reforming in quick pulses. Behind it a glittering

mist swelled through the Epir fleet, and soon swelled through the hedron, stretching and warping the light that touched it.

‘Heavy starlight, mistress. Heavy, heavy light.’

Critical assault imminent.

No kidding.

Amata proceeds. Be ready.

Go now, Crow. I’m not waiting. I’m ordering you to launch.

We must wait.

Who are you to refuse me? I’m the Captain. Who are you? What sentence is this?

You’re not—

Marieta pinched her eyes.

‘God... What Dream is this? What have I done?’

‘Say what, mistress?’

Be ready.

Marieta felt in her jacket pocket for an orb, felt the little hole in the lining of the pocket and tore it wider and pressed fingers through the lining, feeling for remnants. Aux ached the hollow in her mind, and fat thoughts pressed through her, thoughts of a mind that refused form, refused body, refused to be held in shape by any matter in any world.

Aux...

I’m here, Marieta.

Wrapped round their own spacetime, lelk raised themselves through *Evander* and swarmed across the void to the bronze-edged hedron. In a blink they surrounded it, distressing its substance, unbinding and prising it apart, and the hedron puffed out as if

exploded in slow motion. In two great breaths it split apart and then collapsed into two bronze Claremont Archers, *Alecto* and its erstwhile twin.

Amata comes.

‘Things are not in order,’ said Aberdeen Cloud. ‘I don’t like the look of this.’

‘Things are never in order,’ said Marieta. ‘Never again.’

In a searing flash, *Alecto* and *Amata* unsplit and repelled each other, flailing end over end, trailing lelks. *Alecto* crashed through a group of mercenary starfighters, shearing off part of its bronze shielding. Ceramic and metal confetti twinkled from the laceration. And *Amata*, stabilisers sputtering, hull pinked with lelks, tumbled out of control toward what remained of the International Legion line.

A colossal pink and silver cloud had formed across the Epir wayhole, reshaping and refolding in rhythm with the wayhole’s jitters and pulsations. In a single moment it cycled through all shapes and colours lelks could perceive. They too are limited by being, like Aux. *The words are mine.* In the pilot’s mind, Aux bore witness.

Lelks cling like light to your eyes.

Evander, struck by a tremendous force, spun around, engines and stabilisers roaring, while Aux, with mighty focus, fell upon the great ship, slipping *Amata* through one of the holes in its battered shield. Nearer and nearer came the lelk-shrouded Archer, looming on the big screen. It passed from view. The hangar wall exploded.

Lelks swarmed to seal the gash and catch *Amata* spinning through the rubble. They held up collapsing beams and the slumping roof, swallowing all momentum at once, arresting even the tiniest shard of debris in its flight.

Unhurried, then, and with almost sensual purpose, the lelk that encased *Amata* eased her landing gear from her hull, and lowered the little Archer to the deck.

Slipmeaning

Lelk drip like life from your shell.

Amata counted the years, counted out and passed back atoms of the living memory that had grown into her in sympathy with her pilot, and with Aux, and with all lives Aux carried with it. She counted the mutations forced on her by Salgar Byre and *Alecto*, counted all divergences from her manufactured purpose, counted out the rhythm of her pilot's consciousness:

Csula ket usla... Csula ket usla...

Now you are pulse blood, now rays of slipmeaning.

I became real. I kept myself apart in memories. I was mindful of my presence in this world.

Suspended in glittering pink and silvered lelk, *Amata* gazed into the form that wakened in her, this Earthling, her pilot. She revelled in the sympathetic motion of their minds.

The pilot reached out to them both, *Amata* and Aux:

Put me back with the other animals.

We have waited for this opportunity. Pay attention.

The pilot's eyelids fluttered. She lifted a gloved hand and wiped the dry spit from her mouth.

Once I was a girl and they gilled us all and I was married in bubbling mud.

Aux thrilled to the pulse of the pilot's babbled mind, to new passages for life. Soul becomes and becomes.

Csula ket usla. I return you to you, once prisoner, now child of Aux again. Child of love and light.

The words are mine, Bahar.

Old friend!

I am your learning companion.

Hello, Aux.

Hello, Bahar.

Good-bye, good-bye... We've come a long way. How'd I get here?

You volunteered to retrieve me.

Ah-ha... But no! What year is it? How old am I? How many times have we been around together, then?

You know time is not the material of our lives together. We meet in dreams and return to this world in memories. We dream and remember the future together. The world does not enfold us.

Impossible! We're all in the world.

The world is in us.

Ah, tricks and games...

Tell me what you remember, Bahar. Tell me a story.

A story of what?

Who you are, who you have been, who you will become.

I remember nothing.

Tell me. Tell me my name, Bahar.

Aux. You are Aux! Where am I?

I am here, and you are where I am. I am your learning companion. Give me away and you'll go elsewhere. Is there another world you prefer?

Tricks, tricks...

Aux watched Marieta run across the hangar to *Amata*. Leik clung to her, trickled up over her hands and arms, urging her onward. *Amata*'s low-burning engine emitted a sweet, mineral scent. The bronze shell looked like a hide. Through the hollow in her mind, Marieta could feel the pilot stirring inside it.

Are you not our master, Aux? Not anyone's companion. What can an Earthling do against this? You need no body, you need no sustenance.

But I must have a body. I must, Bahar. It is a necessity, an obligation. We can go on together. Permit me.

Where are we going, Aux? Where will we go on from here? When does the future become now?

There is no chronology in Aux. Where I go, none can follow at this time, but come with me and you will become me afterwards, in another form.

Csula ket usla!

We have done this before, Bahar.

Sure, sure. Our memories return.

Aux unclipped the pilot's restraints.

I am your learning companion. Permit me.

Cunning, wise, the secret keeper, Aux tapped out its plea on her mind, and young Bahar, held so long in thrall to *Alecto*, to Ouranos Byre, reached out a thin brown hand to *Amata*'s ceramic console and traced the long-kept hex.

With a soft hiss, a hatch opened in the console, and the little hulm rose through it into her waiting palm. Tendrils from within the hulm snaked out and coiled around her wrist, and layer by layer the hulm unravelled and flattened and wrapped around her arm like a bandage. Its dense heart pressed into her hand.

I am a passage for life.

A passage from where? To where? Whence comest thou?

From going to and fro in the stars. Put away your clocks and calendars: I am a passage for life.

Amata began to crack and split apart along its nanoid seals, admitting thin spears of pinkish light into the pilot's cabin. Bahar, driven by a piercing panic, reached for her boot knife and drew it high, a ghostly blade, and hacked into the nanoid skin of the console, gouging a deep hole. Bahar pushed herself up on weakened, shaking legs and punched her hulm-wrapped fist over and over into the hold, until the thin crystal seal beneath the skin gave way. Viscous liquid welled up over the console and spilled onto the deck. She reached into the hole, deeper and deeper, until her arm was in the liquid almost to her shoulder. What she wanted was *Amata's* cortex, the core of the ship's AI sentience, and Aux wanted it, too, and so pushed her arm deeper still, until her cheek and ear pressed into the warming liquid.

Old friend...

At last she touched the socket in which the cortex nestled, and at full stretch she walked her fingertips over the little ball of nanoid threads until she could wrap her hand around it. Her heart limped. She spat coppery liquid from her lips, working her fingers under the cortex and wriggling it out of the soft socket.

Two doors stand open, shaking.

As Bahar pulled her arm from the hardening liquid, *Amata's* cortex in hand, the ship went dark, her arrays fell silent, the console snapped solid and blackened. Gasping in the thinning air, Bahar squeezed through the pilot's hatch and into the airlock tube. Ahead of her the airlock broke open, and lelk swarmed into the chamber and over Bahar, into her nose and mouth, carrying oxygen through her skin to her lungs.

Marieta Escriva climbed into the chamber and pulled the withered pilot into her arms.

'We've got to move,' she said. 'We've got minutes here.'

'Old friend...'

Minutes to go.

'Save your breath. Quick!'

Marieta helped the pilot across the deck to *Morningcrow*, and the old Corso raised them into gentle light and warmth. He reopened the passage to the utility rooms, and Marieta walked the pilot down to the med bay, helped her onto the bed, and unclipped her stiff grey flight suit and pulled it off her. Beneath it her dark skin had dried out and her limbs were emaciated, and she carried the sweetly unpleasant smell of infection and pus.

The medical android stepped out from its station in the wall and pulled out the straps to restrain Bahar for launch.

'You must secure yourself,' it said to Marieta.

The ship's engines growled, and they were moving, lifting off and turning in place.

'I'll come right back,' she told the pilot, and touched fingertips to the soft, black ribbon wrapped around her arm. She recognised the matter. Her breath quickened. It is hard work for a Dream addict. She wanted to devour it on the spot.

She stepped aside and the android raised the bed, pulling straps down over the pilot's shoulders and across her hips and legs.

'I want that hulm,' she told the android quietly. 'Don't touch it, don't let her touch it, don't let it get away.'

'I have no record for this material.'

'Just don't let it out of your sight.'

The medical android touched the hulm to sample it, and stood up stiffly.

'I am not designed to survive extended temporal displacement, Captain, I require an upgrade package starting at nine thousand nine-hundred-ninety-nine credits.'

'Well, bully for you. Do what you can.'

Lelk in Marieta's skin pulled her both ways. She could feel Aux like a phantom limb. Hurrying back to the flight deck, she took her seat at the console and strapped herself in.

Aberdeen Cloud stood under the big screen, glowing pale lavender, her lelk-sheathed wings stretched out wide. Her broken wing had been repaired. She flexed the wings slowly, watching vis from the hangar.

'Strap in,' Marieta ordered.

Morningcrow dimmed the lights and issued a tonal countdown.

The Tauran looked back at Marieta, looked at the screen again, and folded her elegant wings flat against her back. She sat at the nav console and pulled the harness over her head, cinched it tight, and laid her hands on the holo panel. Lelk flowed down her arms and over the console.

Two doors stand open, shaking.

Morningcrow hovered at the gash *Amata* had made in the hangar.

The tonal countdown ended, and the shell of lelk covering the gash broken open, and *Morningcrow* spat out into space, together with all the contents of the hangar, the fittings, debris, wreckage, spare parts, ballast, tools and service robots. Firing his thrusters, the old Corso streaked across the Epir line, weaving through a cannonade of ion bolts directed at *Evander*. Behind them the great cruiser seemed to rear up, before it buckled and tore apart along its spine. Deep in its core the gravity stabilisers erupted, and *Evander* bulged out and then imploded in a quick, savage flare. *Morningcrow* raced the shockwave, cutting through the Epir fleet and the swarms of mercenary starfighters that were too slow, too distracted, and now were ripped to pieces by the force of *Evander*'s destruction.

Morningcrow howled across the darkness. Mouth after mouth of silvery pink lelk yawned open to swallow and redirect the shockwave that pursued them. Ahead, behind the Epir fleet, the haggard wayhole spread agape. Marieta felt Aux reach through the ship, and through her. She could not resist it. She dared not move against it. Aux took control from her like a parent taking a toy from infant fingers. Lelk held her back as Aux led them along Aberdeen Cloud's nav line more precisely than either Marieta or *Morningcrow* could have done alone. They needed Aux.

Old friend...

Aux reached to them from the pilot's mind. The dark geometry of the nav line astounded Marieta. Aux spread through her, through Aberdeen Cloud and *Morningcrow*. It made use of them all, as was its nature. Aux knew no fear and placed no stock in Earthling chronology, keeping time was meaningless. What had come will come again, what will come has been and gone, and this hour is the blend of all possible minds, all possible memories that Aux has witnessed and encountered.

Assorted minds, and Aux passed from one to the other, installed and extracted, a prize, a token, but these three above all: Marieta, Bahar, and Lasja. One by one they are here, gone, coming. Aux is always ready, always waiting.

Two doors stand open.

Morningcrow sailed around the eerie flatness of the Epir wayhole, behind it to its hidden face, a monumental plane of glassy lys.

The alien multitude courses and calls, sighting the far Earth as sheer light. It is a special system of unshieldedness outside all relation to time and its protection, and Aux gave them to it, cresting with the wave of lelk that cast itself, and *Morningcrow*, upon the other face of the wayhole. With engines and stabilisers screaming and blazing, the old Corso gained slipstream velocity just as his edge touched the threshold.

AND THESE THE WINDS OF HEAVEN SCATTERED,
EVERY ONE, UNHEARD

Nature's desire for her body

Lying on the hillside in the lee of the château at Earthship, looking down over the wide, slow-moving stream and the dense forest, on a clear day she could hear a humn gnawing and drumming on bolesura trees and singing their low, airy chorus. In their lives they tracked all over this world, and over the world's inner world.

Bahar ran her fingers over the ridges implanted seasons ago in her left forearm, her twelfth Earthling birthday present to herself. These days anyone could acquire such implants in Aphrinea, the cosmopolis. She liked to feel sensations on her skin and in her skin. She kept this pleasure to herself. She liked to escape the planet, she liked to leave the atmosphere and soar into the dark, and come back to Serinthea a little changed, somehow. She thought about Remy's ship *Morningcrow*, and how she would steal it, and felt once more the uncertain but exciting attraction that deep space exerted on her body and consciousness. She wanted to be out there, she felt nature's desire for her body, the pull toward deep space. This pleasure, too, she kept to herself.

Perseverance

Up high in the avian quarter lived pirates and thieves and artists of other species. By and by Bahar took herself up there, and soon she fell in with a loving strand of Zsk called *Comfort* and *Disgrace*. For several weeks they enfolded with Bahar, and in their shape of passion the Zsk gave Bahar what she desired: they birthed new passages for her between stars, through the soft skin of the slipstream. Bahar gave herself full to their pleasure and joy.

Up there in the roosts, the Zsk studied the splitting of time. They saw early the future scars of the All. They gnawed at the night and titrated lys from Lu-Serir, drawing auguries from the lelki within and passing them through Bahar's memory.

Comfort and *Disgrace* folded together as *Resilience*, and folded through Bahar to make themselves, all three, *Perseverance*. In this shape, the Zsk gave Bahar the bladeless bone handle of a small belt knife.

The handle, they explained, was carved from the sinus bone of a kirlil tree, the graceful, dominant flora of the Zsk homeworld. A kirlil does not die when it falls or is felled, its life duration being unrelated to any physical form. So too this knife, named Aaveterä, remained a living thing, said the Zsk, still the body of a kirlil, with the life memory and wisdom of its donor tree.

The Finnish explorer Terho Laine carved Aaveterä, and forged its blade from eleud, the time-spanning sap of the kirlil tree, by which one tree is genetically, physically, and temporally related to all others. One stream of eleud flows through all kirlil trees. Terho Laine made Aaveterä to be a killing blade, and a strand of Zsk named *Protection* and *Rule*, with whom Laine exchanged language, named it Aaveterä. By this, in their nascent Finnish, they meant 'ghost-blade.' Aaveterä was a killing knife, but the blade,

characteristic of eleud, was not always physically present: the handle was only a stick of bone until the blade admitted itself, in accordance with some obscure measure of its bearer's need. If Aaveterä's blade appeared, its bearer knew well that the hour of life or death was near.

‘All this belongs to the dead who are to come,’ said the Zsk. ‘All this belongs in the overflow toward the customary world.’

In the realm of the dead, Nature is shaken by our touch.

The ancient one

In her orphaned exile, Bahar trudged through years and years in which she was not permitted to form memories. She was not free, she was bound to Remy Jeffs: sometimes she served him, sometimes she escaped. Others who also served Remy would come after her and take her back to Earthship. At that time the château was not the gentle haven it would become under Sem Morrow's stewardship. She was twelve years old, and Aaveterä hid itself when they searched her cot. It hid itself from their hands, and returned quietly, in its own way, to Bahar.

Xenoforms from many systems lived in Aphrinea at that time, during the long and mostly peaceful cycles of the sunphase Ursu. Ursu's light carried the idea of unity, her steady attention strengthened all life on Serinthea. Earthlings began to arrive through the new slipstream gate, seeking the mystical power of alien sunlight. Many were convalescents. As they arrived, other faces in Bahar's life disappeared. These faces seemed, in her curdled young Dream visions, to have been chased away in some obscure event of violence, chased or traded away from the planet. Even so, one by one, through the years, the faces around her changed from empty grey and fearsome to colourful, unique, kind, energetic. When Sem Morrow took the place of Remy Jeffs, the faces changed: the residents of Earthship were now painters and musicians, poets, writers, photographers, many severely injured or traumatised. And one by one, those servants of Remy Jeffs who had devoted themselves to denying her a memory also disappeared. Now memory was encouraged, but a lifetime of being doped with Dream had tamed her consciousness, and Bahar found it difficult to shape an Earthling memory so late in life. Meanwhile, Earthship itself, which had always, to Bahar, seemed like a living thing inhabiting the château, a living being poured through time

into the mould of the château, brightened with the kindness and love of its new inhabitants, and Sem Morrow's sensitive dedication to safety, peace, and healing.

Aaveterä stayed with her. She did not always remember. Her lived life evaded her, she had little but intuition to guide her, and that voice in her head which called itself her learning companion. Aaveterä's blade did not reappear for a long time.

On her sixteenth Earthling birthday, *Comfort* and *Disgrace* called her back to Aphrinea. She was pleased and excited to participate in their desires. The Zsk commemorated Bahar with passion and devotion, folding through her as *Fortitude*. Three days later they unfolded and refolded around her, shaping *Sorrow* with her. Their abiding desire was to turn the transient toward the lasting, to cause it to take on the soundness of matter. As *Sorrow*, Bahar screamed into the patient Zsk all the confusion and fear of her decade of servitude and forgetting, all the outrage that she carried with her, which escaped her clear comprehension. She screamed her disgrace, her shame and disgust at having grown and formed into a creature that could not remember how it felt, or how it had arrived in this form. She wept until she felt the planet relent and open to accept her dying body. The Zsk, intervening, laid mouths on her, licking the despair from her skin. Three days passed in *Sorrow*, and then the Zsk unfolded, and refolded through her once more as *Fortitude*.

Bahar wondered, later: Is such folding what it means to be alive? Is the meaning of a body that it should be folded with other bodies? Was her own body only the sum of what passed between her and others, over the years?

Someday, she imagined, she could ask herself these questions again, and she would be wiser in time, her body having participated with many other bodies. She saw herself calmly old and creased, white-haired, slow-moving, pained and tired and beautiful. The ancient one.

In her long youth Bahar made trails through the woods and used them often to visit the auhlumn. During the painful days of her body's cycle of menstruation within the physical shapes formed by Dream, she would go to stay with a certain group of auhlumn. There were always members of this group going through their own physical cycles, stages of a longer differentiation and intricately related to the life cycles of lelk, which came to the auhlumn to die through their bodies. The auhlumn made their bodies sympathetic with Bahar's, and so remembered her and even remembered for her. They made passages for her to find them, and in relation to these, Bahar made her trails through the woods. She did not forget the passages, which formed a mental scaffolding for her world. She followed her trails to the cave of warm, silky salt, deep in the woods. At the threshold, speech departs her. In the cave she is presence alone. All lives are possible. She takes off her clothes and lies down with the auhlumn, curling up alongside their slender, apricot-skinned bodies. The auhlumn feed Bahar am leaves, and she is held safe and unhurried in their presence. Older auhlumn bring her branches of berries, and sometimes the small, nutty grubs they love to eat.

Humanesque

In Bahar's nineteenth year, Remy Jeffs returned to Earthship, having at last purchased outright the château and grounds from Byre Bank. From afar, in Qim, Sem Morrow had been overseeing the transformation of Earthship into a kind of convalescent home: for some time, Bahar learned, Remy and Sem had been sending gravely ill and injured artists, victims of a monstrous Earthling war, to recover at the château. This coincided with the slow return of her memory. The opacity of thought that dominated her long young life began to dissipate, and her early new memories were of faces of those who helped her form a habit of attention to create enduring memories. These were the new arrivals at Earthship, the convalescing artists, many shades and shapes of Earthling.

By and by, Bahar discovered it was not Remy who had kept her at Earthship. From Yelsa Manos herself she learned that when Remy discovered the circumstances of Bahar's service, how her blood and her memory had been fed to Byre Bank's hulm for more than a decade, he at once repaid her old family debt to the bank. When he bought Earthship, and technically came into possession of her, he released Bahar from all claims upon her body and consciousness.

'You can tell me if anything like this ever happens again. Anything like it, any pain you suffer. You can tell me anything,' said Yelsa, shaking with fear and fury for what Bahar had endured.

'Don't lose your soul in me,' said Bahar gently, in the Zsk way, and the love of *Comfort* and *Disgrace* emitted from her. She laid it, warm in the palm of her hand, to Yelsa's cheek.

Remy Jeffs was an unusual man. He read poetry aloud to himself at night, drank brandy by the mugful, and wore his long white hair in a braid clamped by bronze rings.

His face was a windbeaten wall. It was he who named Earthship's stream the Blaise, after a poet he admired. He came to her on a warm evening as she sat by the stream with her feet cooling in the water.

'Bahar, your parents have died,' he said at once. 'I'm sorry to have to tell you.'

'Yes,' she said.

'Do you have any questions? Sem Morrow told me you are a child of one of the hulm keepers.'

Remy strained after his breath. Bahar saw the emotion in his eyes, and remembered the Zsk shape for *Sorrow*.

'You freed me,' she said. 'I love you.'

'No, don't say that...'

'It's true. I love you.'

'It doesn't mean what you want to mean. I have been a bad man. I have been a spacefarer for a long time, and I have cheated and stolen and killed. If I freed you, it's accidental: I hardly knew what Byre was doing here. I'm not responsible.'

'I know that,' said Bahar. 'You are not the one to say who lives and who dies. Here, you misunderstand me: we are all animals, every one of us, especially me.'

'You're not an animal,' said Remy. 'You're no beast. You're far more than that.'

'I am *not*. I'm the same broken thing as you bring here now, all these Earthlings you try to heal. What do you think of yourself? Are you an angel? We are of one hopeless, stammering force, I too am made from it, the corpse of a star just like you. You have been a bad man, I can tell the truth of that, but what difference is it to me? What difference, if you'd been good? You waited a long time to make change here, you were always around.'

‘I didn’t know what Byre was doing here,’ said Remy. ‘He’s a madman, you have to be careful. If I had changed things by force he would have killed me, killed us all.’

‘You’d never dare free a lost soul,’ Bahar retorted. ‘Even were you a good man: you are a coward. Anyway, it doesn’t make any difference. The effect of what you do isn’t in your grasp, nor mine.’

She withdrew Aaveterä from its sheath at her side. The translucent eleud blade, strong and present, was bitterly blue, glowing inward, into itself.

‘If it’s my fate to kill you, Aaveterä will make that known to me,’ said Bahar.

Now Remy could see the girl as a beast, all tooth and claw, another passage of death into this world. He did not want to see her that way.

‘It seems certain,’ he said.

‘Not entirely. You have been a man worth killing, but the decision next is not my say.’

‘I can see that. Is it kirlil?’

‘Yes.’

‘The blade?’

‘Eleud.’

‘My God... I want you to cut me. I want to feel it. Don’t wait.’

‘It only draws itself—’

‘I know, I know,’ said Remy. ‘Draws itself to one who deserves to die. I won’t argue with it. Who gave this to you? My God...’

‘Death itself gave me this,’ said Bahar. ‘Go lower, think closer to the realm of the dead.’ She lifted the blade to his cheek. ‘This is the Devil’s prick, it comes and goes in *my* hand.’

Remy was breathing hard.

‘Cut me,’ he said. ‘I want to feel it.’

‘All our lives are a step from death,’ said Bahar. ‘But which step? Who knows what we deserve to feel. You and I don’t know, I’ve never known. How can a fucking knife know?’ She filled her mouth and spat in his face. ‘You bound me to a hulm? I must have been very bad... Maybe it wants me to kill myself.’

Remy pushed up his sleeve and held out his arm.

‘Cut me.’

‘It’ll cut off your arm,’ she said.

‘Cut me, for God’s sake.’

‘For *God’s* sake? I’ll cut your fucking head off. I’ll destroy you!’

Remy seized her wrist and pulled the knife close. ‘Cut me. Stop complaining.’ He was pulling her arm. She punched him in the eye, punched him again, felt a knuckle pop. She plunged the knife into his chest.

Remy was laughing. The eleud blade had vanished. There was blood under his eye, a little bead.

‘Absolution!’ he cried out, laughing and laughing.

His sweaty face and wide mouth and the thin compression of his laughing eyes, the way they disappeared into his cheeks, twisted Bahar’s stomach. She turned away from him and vomited into the Blaise.

Auhlumn watched them from among the trees, across the stream.

In the night, Bahar left Earthship. She had nothing to take but Aaveterä. She did not blame the knife, but swore never again to show it to anyone. Having introduced itself to her, the eleud blade did not show itself again for many seasons.

At the Spacefarers Mission in Aphrinea, Bahar joined a merchant ship *en route* to Johir. There, in Tonnü, she had her hips and thighs tattooed by a graceful and beautiful

Terälehtinen, whose name, following Johir convention, was rendered as a Zsk transliteration: *Through Sadness*. In her skin *Through Sadness* carried flowers of many worlds, and she tattooed Bahar in a style that mimicked her own corollas and petals: red snapdragons, white wisteria, pale lavender spears, wild poppies of old California. The tattoos spread over all the unremembered scars on Bahar's legs, and as they healed they offered her an astonishing new fondness and desire for her own body. But nor could these decorations, nor leaving Serinthea, nor nights of glorious perfumed fucking with *Through Sadness*, nor could these nor anything stop the nattering voices that rattled on and on in her mind, an endless interrogation:

Who are you? What are you doing here?

Bahar...

Who's there? Who are you to speak the name of Bahar?

I am your learning companion.

You!—are nothing of the kind. Look at your paw, demon! I know you, you're none to keep a body company, let alone learn from one. You've done this before, you've tried to become... human, or human-like. Humanesque. Yes, yes, I remember you.

I am your—

Take, take, take! That's all you know. Get gone!

Bahar...

I am your learning companion.

Ha! Learn this: I never learn! That's the sting, demon, the sting, see? I'm the sting, the thorn in your paw... I'm the devil's limp, me!

Your life is added to it

Once, in a hot golden California autumn, Satu Zertov went for a drive with Marieta Escrivea out on the long road from Palm Springs to the Salton Sea. In a little village out there in the dust was a small house and a hangar belonging to Sem Morrow, and an underground launching run for his Claremont Corso *Morningcrow*, and a few old Claremont Pixies in varying repair.

Keeping a body is hard work for a Dream addict. Marieta stuttered from moment to moment. It's real, hard work. A body is not always a solid thing, sometimes it smears out across many worlds, especially for the Dream addict. Sometimes, it's true, the mind is the idea of the body, but not always: sometimes the body is just a memory the mind drags around after itself.

Marieta and Satu took turns driving the Ford Bronco that Jack Clune had bought in Los Angeles. They talked about their vigil, about the weather, about the awful heat that came in waves off the desert on infernal winds. In Echo Park, where Marieta had been living, they were under the Central Los Angeles hemiseal. Palm Springs in its entirety was sealed, of course, and lately New Orleans, Dallas, and Austin. Seattle was sealed and braced against tsunamis. All of Singapore was sealed, and most of Australia, Taiwan, Japan, and Hong Kong, as well as parts of India. In Europe a few old cities were sealed: London, Stockholm, Prague, Budapest, St Petersburg. Anywhere not hemisealed was trying to be. If you can't get out, get under. Not everywhere was so well-off, though: only half of Istanbul was sealed, and part of Rio de Janeiro, part of Manila, and in the United States, just fractions of Baltimore and St Louis and Chicago, and New York City but not New Jersey. A quilt of good fortune and privilege. The Allied Faith, for all their fiendishness elsewhere, was not the problem on Earth. They

gave and gave, donated hemiseals to many cities, to slums, to impoverished nations. They would have built hemiseals everywhere if they had been allowed to. Many governments resisted. The Allied Faith found that wealth did not guarantee access, and old scores prevailed over new money. Parts of Rome were under a hemiseal, but not the Vatican, the Pope held a childish grudge against the Allied Faith. All of Mexico City was under one enormous seal, and all of Lima, and Santiago. A planet of bubbles.

Satu drove and they talked about their vigil, by which they would clear out the dreck of old Dream from her body, and they talked about maybe living together in New Orleans, in a big house or a shotgun double, maybe uptown where the golden light came day after day now, calm and patient, filtered by the hemiseal that guarded the city from the petulant violence of the weather in the Gulf of Mexico. *We should... we should just go, get gone...* Threads of fantasy connected them. From time to time they let the Bronco drive itself, and they orbbed Marieta's good Aphrinea Dream and watched the hard, misty sunlight spice the earth.

At the Salton Sea, the light was soft blue and silver. Far up in the sky over the glassy water they could see the shimmering engines of transport shuttles ferrying supplies and equipment and workers to the spaceport. All the quivering, glittering, spider silk filaments, high above the hills, were the hemiseal repairing itself, knitting around the elevator line and the lunar distribution station. Pillowly white trails crisscrossed the sky, vessels returning from deep space and bound for the Oregon spaceport. Lelk skimmed off slipstream shielding and haloed the trails with pale pink light.

Satu and Marieta were setting up their tent when an old Chevy truck pulled into the parking lot. After a minute, a tall, grey-haired woman climbed down. She was dressed casually, a red and blue cut-off flannel with blue jeans and heavy boots. Shading her

eyes, she looked up at the ships travelling north, and looked out along their glittering plumes.

Marieta felt the old ache in the hollow in her mind. Long gone intuition, gone but come again.

‘This person has been looking for us,’ she said.

‘Who, her? Who’s she?’

Marieta closed one eye and peered across the lot.

‘I’ll go over, in a minute.’

Satu spread out the picnic blanket. It was a warm, dry, bright evening. Marieta watched the grey-haired woman for a while, and the woman climbed back into her big, humming truck, and drove it on down to the far end of camping area. She set up her own tent there, and a small telescope on a tripod beside the tent. Marieta watched her, and felt the shapes of pain soften and flare like autumn clouds in the hollow in her mind, and watched them, too, as best she could. They shifted ever more slowly, year after year.

Do not be comforted.

Satu laid out their dinner of spiced chickpeas and bread and olive oil, manchego cheese, dark chocolate and blueberries, a banana walnut cake, a bottle of red wine, and a jug of Colorado water.

Marieta took a chunk of the cake and walked across the lot carrying it before her like a weapon. Her boots crunched on the fish bones and gravel.

‘Virgo Sterntaler,’ said the woman, ready for this, putting out her hand.

‘Sterntaler.’ Marieta shook hands briskly. ‘Escriva is my name. People don’t normally give both names out here.’

‘They used to,’ said Virgo. ‘I stand for the old ways.’

She was much older than Marieta, sun-creased and lopsidedly beautiful, sleepy-eyed, attentive. Her teeth were crooked and one ear stuck out markedly. A disarming enchantment. She had her long white hair tied back in a loose braid.

‘Come far?’ said Marieta.

‘Not yet. Do you want to look through my spotter?’ The telescope stood beside a cushion made out of a flour sack, and a six-pack of Budweiser beside a bottle of Avoyelles Rum fallen on its side. ‘It’s pretty up there,’ she said. ‘That out there’s actual lelk.’

‘I’ve seen them,’ said Marieta. ‘Why don’t you come eat with us? You can say what you’ve come to say.’

The hollow in her mind ached and nattered.

‘You’ve seen lelk,’ said Virgo. ‘Well, then. You’ve been far, hm?’

Marieta was just looking at her.

‘I never get tired of them, myself. I never saw them up close, this is about as close as I got. It’s a good view through my spotter.’

Marieta put the cake down atop the beer cans. ‘You can enjoy that later.’

‘I sure will.’

‘You can fucking say what you’ve come here to say,’ said Marieta, easy and steady, almost smiling. ‘Do you know why you’re following us?’

‘I know your friend, that’s Satu Zertov,’ said Virgo. She pulled back half her crooked smile: ‘I used to have my hair styled just like hers.’

‘Fascinating. And you’ve come out here following her, or me?’

‘Not following, that’s not accurate. That’s a judgement before the facts. I just noticed it was her, that’s all. I came after the lelk: I’m a lelk chaser, you could say. The sky is enormous out here, isn’t it? So beautiful.’

‘You want to know about lelk? Come eat with us, you can ask all you want. I’ve seen them, she’s seen them. Then you can get gone.’

‘O, I want to know, sure. I want to know. What happens when lelk gets *into* you, I do wonder that. You seem like someone who’d know.’

‘Now, there you go,’ Marieta laughed: ‘You’ve given the game away. That’s not like you, is it? You’re out of practice.’

‘I wish I knew what you were talking at,’ said Virgo. ‘Slow down, will you?’

‘Slow down! Slow down yourself. It’s supptime, come eat, talk.’

‘I didn’t mean anything by it,’ said Virgo, suddenly nervous. ‘Ms Escriva...’

‘You’ve made the same mistake there.’

She hesitated. ‘Well, I don’t know...’

‘Come eat,’ said Marieta.

‘All right, yes. All right. You’re very kind. I see I’ve gotten off on the wrong foot. Let me pull myself together before I meet Ms Zertov. What are you two getting up to out here, anyhow?’

‘Water divining,’ said Marieta. ‘Stop nosing and come eat something. Ask her straight questions, if you’re going to ask. Tell her who you are. Don’t be so goddamn evasive.’

She went back and sat down with Satu, who was reading through a screenplay. She pointed at a hand-scrawled annotation.

‘Can you read that?’

‘Nope.’

‘Sheesh... I can’t even make out a word...’

‘Her name’s Sterntaler,’ said Marieta. ‘Virgo.’

‘Who’s that? O, her.’

‘You ever hear that name? I feel like I might have.’

‘You? You remember something?’

‘Ha ha. She’s going to come eat with us.’ Marieta looked at her watch, and looked up at the glittering lel. ‘Maybe I took too long with it.’

‘With what? What’s wrong?’

‘We might be out of time, if she settles in here.’

‘It’s fine, baby. What difference does it make? We’ll do it tomorrow.’

Marieta pulled her earlobes, and rubbed her eyebrows.

‘Goddamn brain still hurts like hell.’

‘Mm. You want something now?’

‘No, no. She says she’s a fan of yours. She’s seen your movies, she used to do her hair like yours.’

‘She and everyone else. Wait, which style? I hope it wasn’t...’ Satu saw Virgo coming across the car park. ‘O, I see. Fine.’

‘Call off the dogs,’ Virgo called out.

‘Here she comes.’

‘That’s what we forgot,’ said Satu.

‘What?’

‘The dogs. Wruff.’

‘I’ve got coffee,’ Virgo called out.

‘How about that,’ said Satu.

‘She’s interested in lel.’

‘In what? Hullo! I’m Satu.’

‘Virgo Sterntaler. What a pleasure! Hello again, Ms Escriva.’

‘Please, sit.’

‘I loved you in *Some Man I Am*,’ said Virgo.

Satu slowed her thoughts.

‘I’m delighted you watched it,’ she said.

‘Yes, yes, I loved you in that one. Who knew you were so funny?’

‘Who knew! Have some food. What brings you out here?’

‘Here, coffee. I put a machine in the truck a while back, it runs off the battery. It’s good.’

She set down the pot of hot coffee on the picnic blanket, and three matching chocolate brown mugs.

‘And *Territory*,’ she said. ‘You had me in tears at the end! I was a mess.’

‘That’s Yelsa’s doing. It’s easy enough when the writing is so good.’

‘You should’ve won something for that. The Legion of Honour. Nobel Prize.’

Satu gave her public laugh.

‘What about *Coin of the Soul*?’ said Virgo. ‘I saw some clips already.’

‘O, we haven’t filmed but half of it yet,’ said Satu. ‘There’s a whole other half to come. They put out the clips too early.’

‘Well, I hope I’ll get to see the whole thing someday. I sure want to.’

Virgo passed her a cup of coffee.

‘What do you do with yourself?’ said Marieta.

‘Me? I’m retired,’ said Virgo. ‘I travel, I volunteer. Sometimes I help flood sorters find good work. You know, there’s a lot of terrible work a woman can get herself into, a lot of predators out there. A lot of women die from being flooded out.’

She tapped her temple and clicked her tongue.

‘So I hear,’ said Marieta.

‘I try to advocate for sorters.’

‘Retired from what?’

Virgo cut off a little hunk of bread, and a thick slice of cheese.

‘Eat whatever you want,’ said Satu. ‘It’s not much, but Mari cooked the bread and made the... I mean, made the bread, cooked the chickpeas.’

‘Well, this has to be some of the best bread I ever ate,’ said Virgo. ‘Were you behind the banana loaf, too?’

‘It goes stale fast. Don’t hold off eating it.’

‘I sure won’t.’

‘Retired from what?’ said Marieta.

Virgo sipped her coffee and looked at her over the cup.

‘A few virtuous things here and there... No, that’s not the word... Lucrative, that’s it. A few lucrative things, here and there. I worked my career as a police detective in New York City.’

‘O yeah? What was that, lucrative or virtuous?’

‘Something else,’ said Virgo. She sipped her coffee. ‘Obligatory, I suppose.’

‘I was a flood sorter,’ said Marieta. ‘Is that what you tracked me down to talk about?’

‘Tell me, Satu,’ said Virgo: ‘I love Lou Destrier’s movies, but there’s something always eating at me. Did she really set that cow on fire in *Feint, Counter?*’

‘God, no! No, of course not,’ said Satu. ‘It was a machine. It looked good though, didn’t it?’

‘A robot?’

‘The skin of a cow, but on a machine. What would you call it?’

‘A real skin?’

‘Lou found the thing in an antique store in Dallas,’ said Satu. ‘It used to be one of those bucking bull rides, you know, at a country and western bar. They were popular for a while. We adapted it, but that’s what it was, a mechanical bull.’ She swatted at something buzzing in her face.

‘What brings you two out here?’ said Virgo.

‘Careful,’ Marieta warned.

‘We’re having a vigil,’ said Satu, ‘for my uterus.’

She smiled her sweetest. Virgo stared at her, then burst into a raucous cackle:

‘Straight to the uterus!’

‘Well, I want a baby,’ said Satu, sitting up, warming to her performance, and now she had that famous twinkle in her eye, you could set off a rocket with it. Marieta watched her, unsmiling.

‘A baby boy is what I want,’ Satu said, ‘but I might be too far gone. It’s hard to know, these days. Even if I feel fine, the baby might... Well, who knows. I tried to get pregnant every other way, why not a vigil? Gods, prick me full of child!’

‘O, lord! But between us, dear, I can get you into a top fertility hospital, if that’s what you need,’ said Virgo. ‘Unless you’ve done all that, I suppose so...’

Satu gave a little shrug.

‘All the tricks in the book. I just need a change of luck.’

‘And what’s this vigil, a kind of magic?’

‘O, I don’t know, we eat and dance and wave herbs at my vulva. It’s a way to clear the emotional pipes, you could say.’

Virgo laughed and laughed, and hugged herself with happiness.

‘Yeah, it’s real funny,’ said Marieta.

‘I can’t believe it! What a dream, you’re fantastic!’ Virgo clapped her hands, and thrust a finger at the glittering sky. ‘I have to tell you, there is too much lelk in the water, that’s part of the problem. And in our food. Too much lelk. No one knows what they do. That’s really a serious problem, don’t you think?’

‘Ah, those things are harmless,’ said Satu. ‘I’ve been around them all my life.’

‘That’s just it! All your life. All her life she’s been around them! And now what? You can’t conceive. She can’t conceive, and that’s it.’

‘I’m old. My uterus is old. There’s no two bones about it,’ said Satu.

‘Do we even know what they are, these things? These so-called lelk?’

‘I don’t know... What else do you call them?’

‘I know what they are,’ said Marieta. ‘I was a flood sorter. I know exactly what they are.’

‘So tell me.’

‘They’re the shape of the slipstream. They form wayholes, from our point of view. Fuck knows what they’re doing from their own perspective.’

‘How poetic. You’re evading.’

‘*I’m* evading... Jesus Christ.’

‘Tell me in plain words. Scientifically.’

‘There is no bloody scientific language for it.’

‘I see! No words...’

‘O, Christ, that doesn’t mean they aren’t what they bloody well *are*. They’re living beings in themselves, unto themselves. What do you want, a fucking taxonomy?’

‘There’s no need to get upset.’

‘Fuck you. What do you want? Why did you follow us here?’

‘Can you tell it to me plainly? What are lelk? I’m asking you.’

‘You’re asking me... You’re full of asking, aren’t you? Well, I’m telling you: “plainly” won’t cut it, and I know that because I’ve witnessed the bloody things. Have you been in the slipstream? No? Well, fuck you, there’s a couple of plain words. Leik aren’t *what*, they’re *how*. They’re fucking *how* the slipstream even exists. A spontaneous plane of leik curves around into the shape of a tunnel, a tube.’

‘Hu-hum...’

‘Which is a wayhole, right?’

‘A separation between the slipstream,’ Virgo nodded along, ‘which is nominally within the tunnel... between that and whatever chaos lies beyond.’

‘Correct. The void.’

‘Ah, Lucretius.’

‘Huh?’

‘The void,’ said Virgo. ‘Leik swerve from it, like any atomic thing—thus they must be real, physical: “For were it not their wont to swerve, down would they fall, each atom, like drops of rain, through the unbottomed void, and Nature would never have created a thing.”’

‘Sure, sure. How about the International Legion starfighter manual?’ said Marieta. ‘You going to quote me that? Leik are real, all right, who says they’re not? You can fly an Epir battle cruiser through them, that’s about as real as it gets. Pretty plain, too.’

Virgo ran her tongue over her teeth.

‘What are you two—’

‘I’ve known you, haven’t I?’ Marieta said. ‘Sterntaler. O, yes! You shot that kid in Queens.’ She glanced at Satu. ‘This dope’s got an Aux, kid. I can hear it like a tornado, because she does not know how to control it. She thinks she’s a fucking flood sorter.’

‘Mari...’

‘Am I right?’ she snapped at Virgo. ‘You want to be a sorter, huh?’

Virgo nodded cautiously.

‘Were you following us?’ said Satu. ‘Is that true?’

‘No, it’s not true. I wasn’t... not you. Not you, Ms Zertov.’

Aux reached out and scratched at Marieta’s mind.

‘Call off your fucking dogs,’ she muttered.

‘It’s not doing anything,’ said Virgo.

‘Bullshit.’

‘Mari, please...’

‘I can feel it,’ said Marieta. ‘You and that bug need Dream, and now. I don’t know this one, Satu... this Aux she’s got. It’s young, that much I can feel... It’ll take you over fast, Sterntaler. Hah! I remember now. You did penance shallow-sorting cold cases for Remy Jeffs, didn’t you? What was his company?’

‘Pandimensional,’ said Satu. ‘Is that right?’

‘You don’t know what went on,’ said Virgo.

‘O, I know, I got the memory now,’ Marieta said. ‘That’s how I heard about you. I took some of those cases, I remember your name on the files. What was it, penance for killing that kid? Or else it was the only work you could get, huh? Cops wouldn’t even look at you, your name was Mud. The kid was a Byre. Sal’s brother. It’s a wonder you weren’t exiled.’

‘He wasn’t a Byre.’

‘Not by birth, no.’

‘I didn’t shoot her, my partner did,’ said Virgo. ‘Your facts are all crooked, just like theirs. I should’ve shot him, he wouldn’t have grown up the way he did.’

‘If only I had a time machine, I’d go back and kill Hitler.’

‘You’re all snide, aren’t you? Easy enough when your partner’s not ambushed. This child had an automatic handgun. He was preparing to shoot it at anything that moved. This was a summer afternoon, a Sunday. People all over the place. Children playing in the streets. Sure, we shot him, we didn’t kill him, he was barely winged. When he got up again he went right back to what he was doing. We shot him again. We didn’t kill him. Sure, he was a Byre, I don’t remember his name, I can’t... I can’t even *force* it to mind, it’s an error zone.’

‘That Aux knows, why don’t you ask it?’

‘I wish I *had* killed him. Remy tell you all this? It wasn’t in the vis. He drilled my partner with eighteen rounds, and she shot him in the neck, but more out of sheer luck.’

‘Is that what you remember?’

‘I didn’t kill the kid. He’s still alive, even, for all I know. I didn’t testify against my partner of eight years as she lay dying in hospital, so that’s what my burden is.’

‘Wow, that’s some burden.’

‘Do you find that to be true? Do you really?’

‘You’re no martyr. You’re a fucking daisy,’ said Marieta, and she wagged a finger at the sky: ‘Most of those lelks come off starfighters returned from tours scrapping with Epir in deep space. It’s Salgar Byre out there, with all the wealth in the universe, trying to destroy the Allied Faith.’ Aux whistled in her hollow. ‘So you didn’t kill his bastard brother, so what? Nothing came of it then, nothing will now, except that you launched off on this parade of woe-is-me that you’re still on. Why don’t you get a starfighter and go punch in against Epir? You’re young.’

‘Why don’t you?’

‘I fucking have.’

‘All right, all right! Both of you retire,’ said Satu. ‘I need an orb just listening to you. You want one? I can’t keep straight around you, Mari. You’re all over time.’

‘You Dream addicts are going to lel k the genome,’ Virgo snapped. ‘You’ll make us extinct, the way you’re going.’

‘Lel k the genome! Fucking hell, you’ve been reading some paraphernalia,’ said Marieta. ‘Whose angle is that, the Jehovah’s Witnesses? Evangelicals? The Business Council? Lel k the fucking genome, give me a break. You’d better orb some, Detective, for your own sanity. You’ll burn your brains out trying to think against that Aux.’

Virgo huffed in frustration and poured out the dregs of her coffee behind her. The cloud of lel k spread out like pink sugar across the sky.

Satu got up and turned on the lamp, and fetched the sack of orbs from the tent. She came back and gave one to Marieta, held one out to Virgo.

‘Take it,’ said Marieta. ‘We’re not trying to trick you. It’s Aphrinea Dream, made with Serir lys. Take it! You need it. You’ll burn out with that Aux if you don’t give it lys. It’ll smear you out, you’ll need to find a sorter to sort *you*. How long have you had it, anyway?’

Virgo reached out and took the soft orb.

‘A couple of months.’

After a moment she said:

‘A little longer. I need a hulm, now. That’s why I’m following you. I’m already smearing, and they told me—’

‘Who told?’

‘Byre. Remy hired me to Byre Bank. Their people told me about you.’

‘Byre, Byre... I can’t get a break from those assholes. Who there?’

A quaver in Virgo’s voice: ‘I was told you could—’

‘Who! Who at the bank?’

‘The cortex. The Byre cortex.’

‘O, Jesus... Do you hear that?’ Marieta said to Satu. ‘A cortex, no less. What a thrill! You can’t go anywhere in the fucking Universe...’

‘You’ve got to help me. I need a hulm.’

‘Sure, *you* need it. Fucking Byre needs it, right? Look, Dream is all we’ve got,’ said Marieta. ‘I don’t have a hulm! What do you think, I just carry one around?’

‘I had one.’

Marieta laughed, and stopped laughing.

‘You’re serious.’

‘It’s in the truck. But it’s sick, it’s dying... I need another one. I can’t make it back without one, I can’t *go* back without one. I’m hired out to the bank, I’m a freelancer... There’s no record... They’ll just kill me!’

Virgo had turned very pale, her eyes glassy. Marieta steadied her breath and watched her carefully.

‘You had a hulm, but it’s dying. You need another one. Like they grow on fucking trees. You followed me out here because you have some idea I know where to get them. Is that right?’

‘I’ll do anything.’

‘O, *anything*. Well, bully for you. It makes no difference what *you’ll* do. Listen to me: take the Dream. You’ll live long enough to go hassle some other washed-up flood sorter.’

The young Aux reached through a forgotten passage, into the hollow in Marieta’s mind. Aux, the flood drinker. It squatted, staring. Virgo was twitching in distress.

‘I need a new hulm, that’s what I was told... I have to find a new hulm. You’d know where to get one, that’s what I was told. Messages come through the Aux. Remy... I don’t know...’

‘Who gave that thing to you?’

‘Both! Both... Remy, but it belongs to Byre... They both gave it to me. They’re in it together! O, God...’

Virgo’s face moistened with sweat, and Marieta could smell it, a bitter, carbon scent. The two hard lines down Virgo’s forehead deepened, and little by little she had become hunched, as if something heavy had climbed upon her shoulders.

Marieta heard the Aux, its calm tenor just like all the others:

She is deceptive. She stole me.

O, yeah? From who?

Heino, the brother Byre. I once was lost, but now I’m found in you. Take me with you.

Marieta stretched her jaw and grinned.

‘You hear that, Sterntaler?’

‘Mm.’

‘Hear what?’ said Satu.

‘It claims she stole it from Heino Byre.’

‘High-note! Ha ha ha...’

‘Heino, the scion... Isn’t he?’

Virgo nodded grimly.

I am your learning companion.

You stay away from me. I’ve cored out Aux before, I’ll do you too.

I am your learning—

‘Get rid of it,’ said Marieta. ‘Get it out of your head, and get rid of it.’

‘What?’

‘You’re both a pack of riddlers,’ said Satu, and she broke open another orb and held it to her face. Satin threads of lys and lelk floated into her eyes.

‘Take it,’ said Marieta, nodding at the orb of Dream clasped tight in Virgo’s hand, squeezed between her fingers like a soft balloon. The Aux reached its waveforms into the hollow in Marieta’s mind, sniffing around the former nest of her own poor Aux, the hollow it left behind when she dug it out.

An act of masochism.

Whatever you reckon.

You enjoyed the pain.

O, yes, and I’d do it again. Stay away.

‘Take the fucking orb, Sterntaler,’ she said.

Virgo was shaking her head. She looked haunted and wretchedly sad.

‘You’ve got to poke that thing back in its shell,’ said Marieta. ‘Here, give it to me...’

She knelt up and took the orb from Virgo, split it with her thumbnail, and pushed it open across the bridge of Virgo’s nose. Lys glittered with lelk rushed into her eyes.

‘O, God!’ said Virgo: ‘O, God heal me, save me...’

I am your learning companion.

Shut up. Get back in your hole.

We’ll be together soon, and home again.

Come near me again, I’ll destroy you.

Marieta felt the Aux being pulled back from her mind, scraping and clawing. She took another orb from Satu's sack and split it and moved beside Virgo, cradled her head, and pressed the orb apart across her nose.

'O, God... O, God, it's *in* me...'

'What are you two yammering about,' said Satu, not really asking. She lay down and curled up in a sleepy ball, and at once began to snore in little piglet puffs.

Marieta held Virgo close, cradled her as a child and stroked her sweat-damp hair.

After a while she said: 'Do you know Bahar Neiris?'

Virgo drew a deep breath: 'Bahar... I worked with her for about a year,' and let out the balance of it as a sigh. 'I didn't know her well.'

'Did Remy Jeffs hire her?'

She nodded. 'Hired her to sort. She was good at it. You know Remy, don't you? He said he knew you.'

'We all know him. Whatever there is to know.'

'He is mysterious.'

'He's a worm,' said Marieta. 'He's got no sense of loyalty.'

'No, no... Sometimes he is a good man.'

'That's beside the point.'

I am your learning companion.

'Can you hear that?' said Virgo.

All my sunny daydreams turn 'round you...

Don't fucking sing that to me.

'Yeah, I hear it.'

'But you don't have an Aux...'

Virgo grimaced and rubbed her head vigorously.

‘It sings all the time. I don’t like it.’

‘That’s probably my fault. I pick the wrong men to fall in love with. It’s messing with you, and me.’

Virgo sat up.

‘You and Jack Clune?’ she said. ‘Really?’

‘Yeah, *really*.’

‘Before her?’ Virgo nodded at Satu.

‘Yes, before her! Come on, I was young once. I like to think I was worth the struggle in the end.’ With a little smile, Marieta reached over Satu and pulled the sack of orbs to her with her fingertips. She dropped it in Virgo’s lap.

‘Take ’em. Fair weather to you. If you find a hulm, let me know, I want some. If you find any piece of Terho Laine’s hulm, for God’s sake let me know.’

‘But this is a fortune in Dream, I can’t take them all...’

‘That Aux is a living thing,’ said Marieta. ‘It might not feel like it, but it is. It is also ascending in you to the top of the food chain, so to speak. Your life is added to it. I don’t know what you think you’ve got in there, but it needs sedating, and then it needs to come out, and soon. It’ll burn out your brain, if you keep it too long.’

‘Why? What for?’ said Virgo. ‘What’s it want to do that for? What did I ever do?’

‘What for does anything do anything? That’s just what it does,’ Marieta said. ‘Be ready! Don’t take comfort, it’ll make a meal of you. Be ready.’

‘My client,’ Virgo began, but then she said: ‘I’m supposed to carry it to the next sorter. I’m supposed to find a sorter, and give it to her.’

‘Same old story.’

‘Then she’s supposed to carry it on, find another sorter...’

‘Sure, I know it: one woman after another carries it on, burns out, smears out, but Hallelujah! They all give up the devil at the last minute. Too bad.’

‘Wait... Wait, tell me about Aufridius... I was supposed to... I wanted to tell you something...’

‘Aufrinius. What about it?’

Virgo grimaced at the sky.

‘I don’t know... I need a hulm! Any offer, make me... I’ll give you anything you want!’

Marieta was laughing at her:

‘Anything, anything!’

‘I need money,’ Virgo wailed. Her voice was giving out. ‘I don’t want to kill myself... O, God, I keep running out of food. Why do I run out of food? I hardly ever eat... If I could just get a hulm, if I could just get someone to take over this Aux...’

O, Marieta, Marieta...

Virgo looked at Marieta shaking her head, over and over, both refusing and pitying...

She stood up stiffly, picked up the sack of orbs, and walked dead straight across the car park to her truck. In minutes she had packed up her telescope and tent. The dark night was coming on. Marieta watched her.

I always know when you’re coming home again...

The voice came to her as a distant lament. The Aux was familiar, but unknown; young, but of a kind, a lineage. Without doubt it was related to her old Aux. It knew her. But this one did not yet know how to move between minds without temporarily resuming its solidity, and it had no idea how to move with Marieta, how to be human with her. She refused it once again, and felt it slip away through the passage it had

formed to reach the hollow in her mind. Soon enough the hollow would heal itself again, the passage would close off.

The sky lost its colours. The hemiseal glowed ghostly silver behind the hills. Satu watched Marieta with heavy, Dream-shrouded eyes. Lelk warmed her skin, and she could see them snowing down from the clouds over the flat, oily lake, glittering pink. A flight of fairies.

At dawn she snapped awake as if punched in the face.

‘I am tired,’ she said to nobody, to herself, her heart leaping and thudding. To the child: ‘I tell you, I am simply far too tired.’

Pulling her blanket around herself, she waited.

Once more came the voices.

She poked a peephole in the folds of the blanket and looked out at them. It was the white-haired woman again, standing stiffly a little way off, and there was Marieta, getting up.

Which is my little girl? Which is she?

‘I need it,’ said the white-haired one.

‘What more do you want from me?’ said Marieta. ‘You got yourself into this trouble, what do you think I can do about it? It’s too late for advice.’

Virgo, grey-faced, couldn’t keep Marieta straight in her vision. The image smeared out at the edges.

‘I’m going to die,’ she said weakly. ‘You have to help. It is... it is your ethical responsibility!’

Marieta gave a sharp, dry cackle.

‘What the fuck do I care?’ she said. ‘You think you’ve got some kind of right to this planet, do you?’

‘*You* left this place to come to *us*. *You* left it behind. You cannot have it all, you cannot have every place your eyes see.’

‘I didn’t leave anything. I didn’t make you come here.’

‘Your people. *You*...’

‘You’re smearing. That Aux is no good. Orb that Dream, kid! And then, when you’re done fighting it, you can go find Aberdeen Cloud, you know who I mean. She’ll core that thing right out of you.’

Ochre sunrise dazzled the elk that lay pale bright like a quilt on the hills and the water. And now Satu could see it too, what Marieta was looking at in Virgo Sterntaler’s hand, the little stem gun glowing happily. She wanted to scream. How does a scream get made? But the memory was gone, how to activate her voice, how to move her will toward fear. She could see Marieta’s face, her cool, excited smile.

‘Go on. You know what you’re doing.’

When Satu was a teenager, her parents made her join a community theatre company so she would confront and overcome her fear of people. They also took her to a psychologist, who examined her behaviour in relation to various scenarios, and then advised her of the critical problem: she did not breathe properly. At crucial moments of communication she would barely breathe at all. Soon Satu discovered that when she was acting she breathed easily, and was not afraid of anyone or anything. She felt safe on stage, in a marked-out space for which all events had been organised and rehearsed. In the theatre company’s season of *Hamlet* she played the prince. She played him as a spoiled brat, a craven, vain, pompous monster, and fed the role her own narcissism and cruelty. Hamlet’s fascination with death was hers, his selfishness hers, his rage her own unutterable rage.

Satu wasn’t breathing. She wanted to tear the woman’s face from her skull.

Virgo lowered the stem gun.

Limping slightly, favouring her left leg, she went back to her truck.

Marieta raised a hand to shade her eyes from the sun.

And it was a sunny, blue, warm day into which Satu woke again, and a radio was babbling nearby, a news broadcast. Gossip, gossip, mayhem. Skirmishes between the orbital tributaries of Venus and the cloud city of the Allied Faith... Another escape pod from the vanished generation ship *Runeberg* had crash-landed on Phobos, all forms dead from starvation, dehydration, freezing...

‘It is thought they were drifting for up to five Earth years without power,’ said the newsreader. ‘The terrorist Salgar Ouranos Byre, disowned son of the Byre banking group, is sought by All Systems Police. The following is a public announcement from the ASP and the United Earth and Solar Nations government.

‘Terrorist attacks coordinated by Salgar Ouranos Byre have killed one hundred and twelve human workers and disabled thousands of androids in shipyards at Umbriel. Among the dead is Neptunian minister Pel Prytia of the Outer Solar Regions Peace and Development Council. Salgar Ouranos Byre has personally supervised an armed assault on salvage facilities at Barrow, Ganymede. For these and numerous other attacks, Byre is designated an Intersystem Terrorist and is entered into the list of current rewards offered by the UESN government. A reward of up to nine million credits is offered for information leading to the capture or death of Salgar Ouranos Byre. Individuals and groups seeking rewards offered by the UESN will enter unstable or unoccupied regions, on any planet, system, star field, or transit route, charted or uncharted, at their own risk.’

I'm gonna love you like nobody's loved you

September '85. Berlin, Germany.

Lelk cling like burrs to your pelt.

It was their wedding anniversary, and they had arranged to be in the same city, but Jack missed their lunch date and the heavy, wearying sadness draped over her, and she no longer wanted to share a room with him. She moved to the studio's suite at the Hotel Giroux.

That night, at Léonin, she watched his eleven o'clock set with the Company Singers. It worried Satu that this might be all she could expect from her marriage, to be just a face in the crowd. He didn't take particular notice of her. Jack had wealthy fans who spent months and even years following his tours, seeing every show, seeing him more often than she could. Why wouldn't he marry one of them? Why settle for her? Lately, when their paths crossed, she suspected only that their schedules had chanced to coincide, not that Jack had organised himself, for even a day, to intersect with her. It nagged at her that maybe he was just not interested in her, or he felt threatened by her career, or maybe didn't like her singing, or her voice. Maybe didn't like *her*. But her work was her identity, her soul's presence in this world, so how could he ignore it and stay married to her? How could he not have known? It puzzled and frustrated her that their marriage had dulled so soon, that they could not spend more time together, and yet she had this intuition to evade him. She left early and went back to the Giroux.

Satu wanted all good things for herself. She wanted the pregnancy, and desperately accepted it, a surprise but a marvellous gift, but at five months she began to have episodes of paralysing fear about the procedure of childbirth. To extract her body from

such an episode was as to unkiss the lips of Death. Limb by limb she hauled herself back from a mire of anguish and physical pain and mental fog that rendered her mute.

When she told Jack about the episodes he laughed at her. In shock, she laughed as well. It was expedient. Laughter caused spikes of pain in her ribs, one of which was loose and never stopped aching. Laughter raised hard knots of muscle in her shoulders that made her jaw ache. If she laughed or smiled too much in a day, her jaw would lock up and she would begin to stammer, and her head would snap like a short-circuiting machine.

She entertained the possibility that love had made an imbecile of her. Maybe love was not what she wanted, love was a terrible sickness, her desire was deranged, she did not need or want Jack Clune. Nonetheless, as though bewitched, the following night she unfolded herself, limb by limb, and went to see him again at Léonin, and there she loved and admired him and performed the role of The Famous Man's Wife.

At midnight, having lost sight of him in the intermission, Satu took a car to Perverse Imp for her own show. One in the morning, stepping onto a tiny, red-curtained stage in a golden spotlight, she looked out upon her own small audience of fans. She smiled at the faces she recognised, waved at some. The set was being clipped as part of the studio's broad publicity campaign for *Coin of the Soul*. Tonight: *Satu Zertov Live at Perverse Imp*.

She gave them her finest pain, her saddest pleasures woven into music. She gave them what they needed. They needed to borrow her beauty and sadness for an hour, her weariness and disappointment. It was all she had.

I'm gonna love you like nobody's loved you

Come rain or come shine...

And the next night, too, as she stepped onto the stage, she shaded her eyes under the spotlight and looked out at the crowd, hoping to see Jack smiling to her, like once upon a time.

The same Dream passed and shared between them

Lelk took away and replaced many things in her, varying her in quiet ways. They varied her body and mind. When she became pregnant she was horribly sick for a week, savaged by nausea and pain, before she resorted, in despair, to Dream. Thus redeemed, lelk went on varying her. Satu recovered, strengthened, and this sickness did not return.

Through Dream, lelk admitted unto her their strange, opaque attention. Her Dream consciousness spread out a new way, clearer throughout and clearest at its farthest edge; but the racket of voices in her head did not abate. Lelk altered her pain as they passed through her, reshaping it and moving it around her body. They did not take it all away. She came to feel like a medium or translator between the ghosts of another world and the ghosts she kept in her body. Lelk made an emulsion with her intuitions. They made passages through emotions, and new lys vessels in sympathy with her veins and arteries. They patterned the light of another star with the signals in her spinal cord. While she slept, lelk consumed her bones and rebuilt them, and reformed her fascia and tendons, muscles and ligaments. This new body they set in motion, though they left the pain for her.

Sweating through lelk-bitten sleep, at first light a sharp electrical *s-s-s-SNAP!* through her skull—awake!

I'm here!

Her memories scatter like rabbits at the shot.

What day is it?

She pulled herself up, straining in the mouth of the obscure pain, steadying herself against the wall to ease open her seized joints. Lelk trickled in and out through the pops

and pulls and snaps, her ribs clenching, hips creaking, cracking. Always in the mouth of something, Satu, some pain: it went on, and on, and on, even in her sleep the pain would never let her settle. God, the pain! The terrible, maddening pain... No drug helped, she tried everything from marijuana to Lysodol. Dream, not really a drug but a living thing, a sympathetic being, at least varied her away, for a little while. O, but one thing costs another! It is hard work for the Dream addict, keeping a body. The seasons pass as days. Vague bodies differentiate within, and press into the skin.

Marieta and Satu and Bahar each used Dream from the same hulm, the same Dream passed and shared between them in their long young lives. They all used it while Lasja was gathering toward them through Satu, and even after the child joined them in this life, folded through with lelkh.

Their Dream came from a hulm that Terho Laine, the famous Finnish explorer and astrobiologist, had brought back from Serinthea to his home in Vienna, Virginia. In his house on Rambling Road, he grafted the hulm to his arms and fed it his blood. The hulm in return invested him with lelkh, and also consumed his cancers and calcifications, and the foam of lelkh-glittered lys that formed like sweat on the skin of the hulm was Dream. The hulm did not demand blood, but Terho Laine conceived of Dream as the byproduct of an intimate physical exchange. He was neither right nor wrong. He would scrape it from the hulm and seal it into soft orbs he made from the seed skins of cave flowers that grow natively on Serinthea, within the labyrinth at Qim. Laine brought back crates of skins. This too was neither right nor wrong: the hulm, old and full of worlds, would have found a way to satisfy Laine's vision. And lelkh simply go on folding, unfolding, refolding through the hulm, on and on, through orbs, through breath and blood, through all bodies to which it is introduced.

Old Terho Laine would take in visitors and give them orbs of Dream and read their eyes for signs of Death. He knew It was coming for him. In his stealing fear of Death, he observed It as a manifold hedron of darkness, pressing through his skin and smearing him out in Its time dimension.

His first inkling of the devastating depression which would settle upon him, subsequent to his return to Earth, was a sense of being trapped and suspended, aghast, over the surface of a tarry plane of silence, not permitted to move away nor to come closer to the plane. A thick, grey murk infused him, until, by nightfall each day, scarcely could he sit to gasp at breath before an utterly indifferent force pressed him into unconsciousness. It was not sleep, and he did not wake refreshed. It gave his body nothing whatsoever.

The artist Glaz Arub was Laine's only visitor in the last months of his life. Perceiving the trail of Death, she followed it to Vienna, to Terho Laine, and the graceful hulm that endured with him.

On display at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art are Glaz Arub's eight-foot-square oil paintings of the zone of communion between the hulm and Laine. The hulm, an eerie black cylinder of Serinthean fungus, roughly the shape of a human thigh and covered in fine, hairlike tendrils, passes its thatch of roots into Laine's arms and chest, spreading through his body and divining passages for lelks into his circulatory system, and beyond, where the body cannot persevere. Consciousness, unbounded, goes on: lelks cling like burrs to your pelt.

These passages for lelks, Laine told Glaz Arub, were present long before his body was created. They are passages for life, his body grew around them and through them. And even these particular passages have always been present in the hulm's field of

possibility, so that, as the hulm's roots passed into his body, it patterned with him in a way it already knew. It made a home with him, so to speak.

If any physical effort were to be considered universal to all species, wrote Terho Laine in a letter to Glaz Arub, reproduced in the exhibition notes which accompany her paintings at the Museum, surely this must be the effort of home-seeking, of striving in search of home. As best I have been able to discover, he wrote, this does seem to be the essential purpose of consciousness. Of course, there are other questions to compel or confuse us. What is home? In relation to whom? How much is enough home? When must we say we have gone on long enough?

In the painting titled *Lys Deposits, October*, morning sunlight streams through Terho Laine's bedroom window and swerves balletic around the hulm, which sits on the nightstand beside his bed. Lelk glitter round the downy, feathery hairs that stand out in a hoop around its middle. Its roots run over Laine's arms and chest, entering his body at the base of his neck behind the collar bones. His grey skin has a spectral sheen.

The painting *Sealed Orb and Opened Orb from Cancer Hulm* shows orbs of Dream that Glaz Arub produced from the hulm after it ate away Terho Laine's stomach cancer. Laine, very old, soft-eyed, naked and thin, still looks strong, still recognisably the storied galactic adventurer. His moustache has grown long over his wide and parted mouth. His face glistens with sweat and lelk. In his left hand he holds the sealed orb, and the opened one in his right. A swirl of Dream like shivering steam curls from the open orb toward his nose and eyes. He stands in dusty light in an untidy study, the maple light of summer evening, with books piled on every surface. Hand-drawn star charts cover the wall behind him, overlapping each other, and a drafting pencil in a mechanical arm hovers over them. The hulm sits on a pile of books on the floor. Its delicate tendrils flow like a net of water to Laine's hairless torso, his skin patterning

with their touch, and his long, spirited life is there, still there, still bright in his kindly eyes.

A disconnection

Satu felt the years of Dream building up inside her head, as though in the lining of her skull a strong balloon were being inflated. Many lonely nights, even if nothing had gone wrong, even if her show had gone well and she sang beautifully and delighted her fans, she would return to her room feeling like a gluey clod. Memories would not stick, even of that very night: they wobbled and smeared, and her limbs and hands felt prosthetic, and she struggled to synchronise her breath with lulls in the pain that shimmered through her body, wave after wave. The malaise leaked decay into the details of her thoughts. Alone in her suite at the Hotel Giroux, her resistance gave out. She lay on the hard, flat, orange sofa in the dressing room and fell asleep at once, soon dreaming intensely and repeatedly that she was smacking herself in the head with a small, heavy rock. As she woke the rock became a potato.

She could hear his breathing. He was trying to wake her, pushing her awkwardly, drunk.

‘Sally, it’s me... it’s me...’

Pushing her awake, but also covering her with a blanket, folding a pillow across her face: ‘I want you to make a song with me,’ the first thing he ever said to her.

Satu came awake in a shock, and for a moment he was there. She laughed right in his face. He wasn’t there. No blanket, no pillow.

The dense meat of silence wrapped around her.

Later, when she returned to the hotel with the sack of orbs, there was a bag of navel oranges from Jack, and a note: *See you “round”?* How droll. It was their anniversary day. The message had been written on *his* hotel stationery, The Lyre Hotel. She could just see him calling someone up to his room to collect it.

What use was it to ask the Giroux's desk robots if they had actually seen him? Satu knew they hated her. She asked instead for the local phone so she could call him at The Lyre. Between certain hotels in Berlin at that time there was still a local phone system, a remnant from an early Glaz Arub performance piece called *Seventh Secret*. The piece used desk robots as temporary storage nodes for human secrets. Any registered guest could phone down from their room and confide a secret, and the desk robots would retain them for a certain duration, before scrambling the order of secrets they had received, stepping out into the lobby, and announcing their seventh secret. It was Glaz Arub's first piece of conduit art. The hotels kept the old phone system to effect a nostalgic mood in the lobbies.

She phoned Jack at The Lyre, and was transferred to the main comms system and connected to his room.

'I can't see you,' he said. 'Where's the vis?'

'I'm on the old line. I thought it might be charming.'

'No. What ship did you come on? Is Bahar with you?'

'Happy anniversary.'

'Is she there?'

'Hey, pal...'

'Happy anniversary. Answer the questions, please.'

Satu listened to the wheeze in his breathing.

'Did you get the oranges?' he said.

'O, did you bring them? I must've missed you.'

'I need a ship,' he said. 'I need a slipstream pilot.'

'What for? Where are we going?'

'Baby, could you just ask her, please? Could you?'

‘Not if you won’t tell me what’s wrong. What am I supposed to say?’

‘I need a pilot!’

‘Are you in trouble? What’s wrong?’

‘Nothing. I need a pilot and a ship.’

‘Jack.’

‘Sally, please. I can’t...’

‘Just tell me what happened so I can help you!’

‘Don’t call me again on this fucking toy,’ he screamed, and hung up.

She called back. It brought her a little smile. The phone lines hooked.

Thin ripples of static. A disconnection.

Up in her room she used her own device to reach Bahar.

‘Hey, you. Did you see my show?’

‘Of course,’ Bahar said. ‘I had to go early and drive Lou to Dresden.’

‘Is that where you are now?’

‘Yes.’

‘How is it?’

‘I don’t know, just streets. I haven’t left the car.’

‘Was I very bad tonight?’

‘You? You were sexy. You were perfect. The Imp was sold out.’

‘O, love... Well, what’s in Dresden? What’s she doing?’

‘Investors. Dinner. Someone’s got a restaurant here. It’s your kind of place, lots of fancy people making deals.’

She could hear Bahar chuckling.

‘You’re not all that funny,’ said Satu with a smile. ‘Does it look like a nice place?’

‘What’s it called?’

‘The restaurant? Um... Mama Schiff. It’s an Italian place. Does that make sense?’

‘Not... really... ‘Mama ship’? O, ‘Mothership,’ I get it They’ve got some real wits in Dresden, huh?’

‘There’s laughter in the streets.’

‘Baby, I’ve got the worst pain in my neck,’ said Satu. ‘When are you coming back?’

‘You need vitamins. When was the last time you ate?’

‘No, no... I need a massage. I need someone who loves me.’

‘Sure, and what’s a little lelq gumming up your DNA? Who doesn’t love that? I sure do. No regrets. How many orbs did you have today?’

‘I’ll talk to you later.’

‘You buzzed me, kid. You want me to come back early, is that what you’re saying?’

‘Yes! Right now. Ah!—I remember: Did Jack call you?’

‘He did. Does he remember?’

‘Hardly.’

Bahar sighed. Satu could hear tiredness in it.

‘You need rest, my love,’ she said. ‘We need a holiday. Let’s go to California.’

‘O, I can’t... But come with me,’ said Bahar. ‘I want to do an orb run. There are four crates of orbs from the Laine hulm in our cargo hold, we ought to be able to get good credit for them. I want to hit Earthship, then the Sandburg settlements, and New Devon, and that should do it. Then Titan, then we can think about California.’

An smile sprang to Satu’s lips. Her heart felt bigger than her chest.

‘We might try to find Glaz Arub out there, she always has ideas about where to go next.’

‘Then let’s find her. How about that?’

‘O, my darling thief, I do enjoy our little deviances...’

‘Have you spoken to Jack, though?’

‘I listened while he screamed at me, does that count?’

‘What did he say?’

‘He’s looking for a ship and a pilot. He wants you. He wants *Morningcrow*, and you to fly him. He’s in real good form, won’t listen, won’t take anything for an answer. And he sent me a bag of fucking oranges. I don’t know what goes on in his brain.’

Bahar snorted a laugh.

‘Did he say anything about the cargo?’

‘No. He might have, but I made him angry too fast.’

‘Well, never mind. We can have some fun, the two of us,’ said Bahar. ‘Lou’s going to Rhea, you’re not due on Titan for another half-year, is that still right by you?’

‘You know me better than I, darling.’

‘No one’s told me any different, anyway. We can make good money in that time, kid, if we go out soon. We can lose the wrecking crew in the Sandburg settlements.’

‘Good God... I forgot all about them. Are they really still looking for you?’

‘Sure, the bounty’s gone up, I’m worth a pretty penny now. But I know all the quiet old crooked routes in the slipstream. By Titan we’ll have plenty of breathing space.’

‘You’re a wicked old pirate,’ said Satu happily. ‘When do we leave?’

‘I’ll bring Lou to the spaceport and then come fetch you.’

‘It’s our anniversary today, you know. Me and him.’

‘I know.’

‘Do you eat oranges?’ Satu rubbed her eyes and yawned. ‘A whole fucking bag of oranges. What do you do with them?’

‘Me? I dig a hole in the top with my thumb and suck out all the juice.’

‘Whoo! Bonanza!’

Bahar laughed, and Satu laughed with her, but trembling, in the mouth of another pain, this fearsome need:

‘You rat! ... O, baby, I always miss you so fucking much, always, always... Don’t you even feel it a little bit?’

‘Sure, sure I do,’ said Bahar, ‘of course I do, you know...’

‘Then what? What are you waiting for? Why don’t you take me away, take advantage of me, make a happy life with me! Rescue me, I’ve been waiting so long... Aren’t you a free woman?’

‘Ha!’

‘If I lost you I’d lose all the light in my life! Come here, baby... Can’t you think about it? As soon as this kid comes out I’m going to divorce her father. Be a mama with me, how about it? You and I’d make a hell of a team.’

‘Her? You found out already?’

‘No, but I know. I just know. Lasja, I’ll call her. Lasja, Lasja, li’l Lasja... How about it? I’m scared as all hell, Jesus Christ...’

‘Don’t talk that way, come on.’

‘I can’t sleep, my guts hurt all the time, my whole body is so sore I must be made of pain... I just about lost sight of anything beautiful in myself, I’m telling you. Who the hell said this is meant to make you feel like Nature’s first woman? I feel like shit. What day is it?’

‘I’ll come get you in an hour,’ said Bahar. ‘Three o’clock, got it? The Giroux, right?’

Satu sighed. She felt unstitched.

‘Yes, mistress.’

‘Wait in the lobby for me.’

‘I’ll never get over you. I love you.’

‘I know.’

‘Do you hear me? I *love* you,’ said Satu. ‘And I’m not scared of you. I love *you*. I don’t want him, I never wanted him, I want *you*. Go on and take me, I’m all yours. I *need* you, I need you... You are the light, Bahar. You make everything visible again. Come here, light! Come to me...’

‘Lou’s coming. Lobby, three o’clock.’

‘Tell her hello from me. Wait for you in hotel lobbies, it’s all I ever do. It’s all I want to do, if that’s what it takes. Okay! That’s it, then.’

‘Say good-bye. She’s here.’

‘I swear to God I’ll make you my wife, Bahar Neiris. I... God, I swear... Do you know what it means to be married to someone? It means they can... O, I don’t know, what do I know? I know what I *want* it to mean.’

‘I love you. I have to go.’

‘I love you! O, I’m going to die happy! Quick, wait, let me say it: I love you more than anything, anyone, anywhere, anytime... O, that’s no good! How fucking tedious I’ve become.’

‘Work on it,’ said Bahar. ‘I’ll snatch you fast at three. Be ready.’

‘Yes! Snatch me, come for me, always, always, always...’

Whistle while you dream

By half past two her heart was an anxious bulb. She stuffed her clothes in her duffel and went downstairs to wait in the lobby for Bahar. Her body ached and she wanted to reach Jack, at least to leave him a message, to tell him she was leaving without him, she was leaving with Bahar, to tell him, to remind him she was pregnant and she and the baby were leaving... O, but he wouldn't care! He knew everything, but he didn't care before, and why would he care more now? And besides, she couldn't bear to hear him disown the thing, and she wasn't sure he wouldn't. He might do it just to get back at her, for whatever he imagined she had done to him...

O, he won't care! Better get gone on your own, kiddo, she told herself. Just get gone, you and Bahar and the baby, then you'll be safe. Get gone and keep moving, and if you really, really want to reach him, well, what difference does it make to him if it's now or some other time? When did he ever care? Get gone now and get safe with Bahar. She's got his orbs, anyhow: you've got him by the orbs! She cackled with delight.

'They're the scum of the planet,' said a man standing disconcertingly close beside her. Satu yelped in shock and leaned away from him. He was a pungent, corpulent man with a military haircut, dressed in blue jeans and a white linen shirt. The screen opposite the reception counter was playing a stream of advertisements and news clips.

'You were lookin' like you'd fallen in a trance,' he said, moving his gaze from the screen to her and showing teeth. They made their way toward a smile, but didn't quite get there. Satu saw images flicker across his moist eyes. She saw herself: a clip from *Coin of the Soul*, not even finished filming but already clipped, already being pushed out to lenses.

The man squared himself and studied her face, and the clip passed, replaced by one of a fat, naked, blue creature whipping a lace-white woman tied to an iron rack. The man fixed the smile upon his mouth and stepped toward her.

In fright, Satu reached out and shoved him, but her hands sank into his body as though he were made of cream. As she tried to pull away he moved with her, stepping closer, and her arms vanished into his body. Still smiling, he reached out to embrace her. Satu screamed and fell back with all her weight, hanging from him by her trapped arms, slipping on the tiles, her shoulders straining. The man reached out calmly and his body swallowed her arms.

Then there was someone at her side, and a bright yellow flash, and a heavy shock snapped through her head and knocked her down. Scrambling backward, she saw the security cyborg stab a long wand into the fat man's side, driving it deep into the weird flesh. The fat man's smile dropped. His body peeled open. The wand was a kind of cattle prod. The security cyborg lit him up. Fading transparent, the man's face broadened and smeared out across the air like milk across glass, and with a mighty retch he sucked himself into his own mouth. A bulge of shadow spread over the startled security cyborg, and then evaporated.

The elegant hum of the lobby returned. Clips of music trickled to Satu, reaching her between wheezing breaths and thudding heartbeats. Her hands and neck and shoulders cracked and clicked as she regained her feet. The cyborg was helping her up. He placed her duffel beside her. The manager was hurrying over.

'Ms Zertov, please!' he said, blocking her way out. 'Please, forgive us, these creatures are a menace, a plague! We anticipate an update to our security this evening, Ms Zertov, this very evening. Please forgive us! They come in and out, a menace, please...'

‘I’m not hurt,’ said Satu, shaking, shivering. ‘I’m all right, really. You’re very kind.’

‘They are a criminal gang,’ said the manager. ‘We must protect our guests. Is anything missing? You’re not injured?’

‘I’m all right, thank you, thank you, sir... Please, I have to go...’

‘Ah, but, please as much, Ms Zertov, one moment of your time! I must advise and beg you, implore you, to consider changing your fingerprints immediately. If it had your hands, this creature, they now have your prints and circulatory data, and of course your face and eyes. You must consider replacing your elements, Ms Zertov, perhaps even the blood. I beg you! You must consult a medic, a healer.’

‘I’m fine, I don’t need this... Get out of my way!’

‘Ms Zertov, I assure you this is highly serious, most highly serious! Here, I offer you the personal contact of our associate, the associate of Mrs Giroux herself. She is a most talented individual in this unfortunate line of work.’ The manager wrote a name and a long number on the back of a business card and pressed it into Satu’s hand.

‘Please consider your physical matter, Ms Zertov, your entire physical, and perhaps, ah, ah, intellectual matter, yes? You understand? Your personal secrets, I mean.’

‘For God’s sake!’

‘I beg you, I beg you in serious candour... All patterns of life are endangered, Ms Zertov, I am most highly... I tell you this as my personal experience: I was forced to change bodies because of these creatures. You have been compromised. This is my personal recommendation. They are criminals, you understand? Sick, sick criminals. Consider the value of your body!’

A grandfather clock in the little library at the back of the lobby rang out its noble chime, one, and two, and three.

‘Let me pass,’ cried Satu. ‘O, let me through, sir! I’m sorry, please, please...’

She pushed past the manager and ran outside. Rain poured down beyond the portecochère. Bahar was never late. Vehement sheets of rain, and the thin trees along the street swayed and swung together.

A small, black car veered into the driveway and swished around to stop in front of the doors. The car was sleek and low. Its passenger door slipped up over its roof. She heard Bahar calling.

In miraculous relief she climbed into the passenger seat and pushed her duffel under the dashboard. The door slid shut. The rain became a whisper.

Bahar leaned over and pressed her arm, and put her hand to Satu's cheek.

'I'm late,' she said, and Satu, small of voice, said: 'Please go.'

Bahar did not contend. She lifted the car and banked away.

'What happened?'

They sped around the drive and dashed out into the flow of traffic. Satu gripped her seat as Bahar nosed them up into to a higher traffic stream, and up into the next, rising stream by stream to join the thinner line of vehicles flying through the floating metacity high above Berlin. The manager's card was still in her hand, crushed into her shaking fist.

'Something attacked me,' she said.

'What! Are you hurt? Show me...'

Bahar spun the car into a traffic spiral ascending a residential tower, and pushed the wheel into the dashboard. The car took control.

Old friend.

Satu held out the card.

'What's that say? I can't focus.'

'Aberdeen Cloud,' said Bahar.

‘You know her... You sound like you know her,’ said Satu. ‘What is this? Who is she?’

Old friend, come back.

Quiet.

‘Yeah, I’ve heard of her. Mari used to travel with her,’ Bahar said. ‘Long ago, and not so long. Who attacked you?’

‘I don’t know! I’m not... I think I’m fine. It caught me in its body... O, God, like being frozen, it was so cold, like... empty... airless cold! Evil, that’s what I felt... O, there *is* evil in this world, Bahar! I thought my arms were going to be ripped off, I thought I was going to be torn apart!’

‘O, Jesus...’

‘The manager gave me this, but I don’t know... He said it has my prints,’ said Satu, ‘and now I have to get new ones, he says.’

‘What for? I don’t believe it,’ said Bahar. ‘I think I know the thing you mean, it’s a dumb illusion, it’s not advanced at all, it’s a swindle.’

‘My face, my eyes, my blood, even! Do I have to change bodies?’

‘No, of course not!’

Always in the mouth of something, Satu. The pain was coming through her left arm.

‘They said it got my face, my eyes,’ she said, ‘I have to change...’

But it grew and grew, a sudden torture, agonising, searing, a slash across her chest as if she were being peeled. It tore the breath from her. Bahar seized her as she spasmed, pressed her back in the seat and pulled the safety harness down around her. Gagging wretchedly, Satu gaped in horror at the feeling of each rib being pulled away from her spine, wrenched like wishbones, and something was in her throat, bulging her neck, choking her.

Bahar recoiled as it emerged, a blue worm wriggling from Satu's mouth. As it pressed between her teeth it formed a smeared, uncanny face, a wide mouth under flat, black eyes. She reached across the centre console and fumbled at the thing, trying to seize it round its forming neck, but it was slick and her hands kept slipping. Its hollow black eyes turned to her and raked across her mind, a screeching that obscured her thoughts and scrambled Aux. She heard it struggle to return:

I am your learning comp... comp...

Oily light smeared off her skin. She felt the monster pressing into her, too, she could feel it in her throat, choking, swelling.

... comp... comp...

Straining for breath, Bahar put her hand to the stem gun holstered beneath the dashboard. The little gun glowed bright and pulled her hand around it, begging to help her. Dear little beast! It understood what Bahar wanted. But the blue face understood, too, and struck at Bahar's hand, swallowing the gun, sucking itself up her arm, and an excruciating chill reached deep into her lys vessels. But the stem gun was unperturbed, and it swelled up, overjoyed, and coughed into the blue monster. Bahar felt the muzzle of the gun thrust up against something hard. Abruptly the slit mouth released her arm. Its flat, dark eyes widened, and Bahar pulled the gun free, plunging her other arm at once into the monster's mouth, thrusting deep to find again the hard thing the gun had touched, a rippled ridge, hard as bone. She fumbled at it, working her fingers through a hole in its side. Gaining purchase, she hauled on the ridge with all her strength, and wrenched the ghastly blue pupa in one swift motion from Satu's mouth. The stem gun understood. It yelped to her. Bahar kissed its muzzle to the monster's face and triggered the charge.

Gluttony and joy! The stem charge burrowed into the awful blue head, trembling through it, separating its molecules. With a delicate sigh the blue worm atomised into a sooty cloud, and the stem gun sucked the cloud into itself.

Came Aux once more:

Vehicle uncontrolled. Impending obstacles. Safety—

Open the door!

Aux obeyed. Bahar's door flew open. Muscles bulged in her shoulders as she hefted the stem gun and its heavy meal, directing its muzzle into the air. She squeezed the tongue-like ejector and the little beast disgorged a gulletful of foul, blue-grey matter that streamed out into the rain. Bahar jammed the gun, once more its normal weight, back into its warm holster, and it released itself from her with a slippery sigh.

I am your learning companion.

Her heart surged and limped. Satu clutched at her neck, gulping air.

Impact imminent.

The car's controls bloomed from the dashboard. Bahar seized the wheel, peering through the warning signals that spilled across the windshield. She scanned the sky. A stern, solid-looking black shape spread out before them, and seemed to turn a little, as if to square itself.

Aux! Where's my ship? I can't see!

Impact warning. Navigation marked out.

Where? I can't see! Set clarity!

Clarity set. Issue instruction.

Morningcrow, code beam six, escape nine-nine. Show me my fucking ship, Aux!

Police pursuit. Impact warning. Navigation marked out.

Cursing fiercely, Bahar pulled the car up and blasted them high, clinging to the last clear nav line, but it wasn't right, the line didn't look like anything she would have accepted. She could see flashing lights on the monitor, blue and red and white. The police pursuit.

She tried again:

Set clarity!

Clarity set.

And enunciated:

Morningcrow, code beam six, escape nine-nine.

She skimmed the stern darkness above the upper city, trying to orient herself.

Where is he? He should be here, Aux...

A police speeder blazed past them, afterburners flaring, almost out of control. It looped way down and back up around a tower block, trying to line up for a strafing run, but the angle was much too steep, there wasn't enough time to correct it. It careened right past them again. Ahead, the stern black shape spread out in the falling darkness, a silver swirl at its core. It looked for all the world like a wayhole, but here? Under the hemiseal? Bahar couldn't fathom it, and yet, a flat plane like that, swirling with lys... It looked so much like a wayhole, and even behaved like one, staying squared to their imminent approach.

I am your learning—

Learn to find my fucking ship!

Bahar felt the air inside the car contract around her arms, around her legs, restraining. A pale light reached out from the black plane and slipped smoothly around the car, pressing through it and encasing her and Satu, unconscious in the passenger

seat, in a silvery bubble. The light varied and hardened around them, a shell of light, enfolding them, bringing them closer.

Assuming command.

The car's controls receded into the dashboard, the restraining force pulling Bahar back into her seat.

Help us, Aux!

She could hear it singing, far away, Jack's old song:

If this ain't love, I got to leave you... I got no love left... if this ain't love, darlin'... I got no love left to give...

Now the sheath of light contracted and pulled them toward the stern, black shape, which once more tilted and turned to face them. Muddling with the silvery light at its core, the shape came open, and lelk reached out in a pinkish curl to join the pale sheath wrapped around the car.

Bahar, in a shock, wished herself ready and good-bye, prepared to be pulled into one of those whispered-of passages in spacetime so obscure to human life that none can survive but by miracle. She was always ready for death, and here it was. In a moment this quirk of lelk would rip apart the unshielded car, and rip apart their bodies, and smear their minds into oblivion.

But there was no other face to the black shape, as to a wayhole, and they did not slip away, nor smear, nor sprawl, molecule by molecule, into the All. Instead they passed through the darkness, as through a curtain of fog, and there, all along, was *Morningcrow*, waiting, hanging in the air, cargo bay wide open.

Aux piloted the car into the bay, and the door closed behind them. Then Bahar felt Aux reach out to *Morningcrow*, and the two came directly into correspondence, as easily as if they were partners in eternity.

The police speeder tore back past them without taking a shot, its pilot skimming the black shimmer in the air, but not seeing behind it. A decoy, and lilk for chaff... Then a dazzling light from behind the shimmer, and *Morningcrow* shot through, firing thrusters as the cargo door latched, even as the straps were snaking out to capture the car, arresting its momentum, lowering it into the docking clamp, Aux singing:

Whistle while you dream... Send your troubles far away... Far as a dream can dream...

But not the right words, not Jack's words, Aux sang the way Marieta would sing to herself:

Cry 'cause you've seen all we've seen... But you've got to go on bein', darlin'... Whistle while you dream...

O, Marieta! Marieta, dear darling Marieta, not everyone's hands hold so many lives! What luck that those who inherit your ship are the ones you loved best, the ones you would've wanted to protect! Or else, maybe Aux knew all along what she needed, knew her and understood her, better than she ever understood herself, O Marieta, Marieta...

Wise old *Morningcrow* spun away from the police line and blasted high and fast, too fast for their pilots, who could do nothing but watch the Corso vanish among the many streaks of light that streamed into the heaven.

Merging them into Moonward traffic over the Baltic Sea, Aux transmitted the Finnish code that gave them right of passage to the Lunar sling.

Meanwhile, Bahar carried Satu to the medical bay, as once Marieta had carried her, and to the very same bed. She laid Satu down, cradling her head to the pillow, as the medical robot stepped out from its station in the wall and pulled up the soft restraints to secure Satu to the bed, anticipating the sudden acceleration of the sling. Bahar wiped

Satu's face with a warm antiseptic towel, cleaning the blue-grey residue from her mouth. Her breath was stale, but she breathed freely. Her face was terribly bruised, almost dark green.

'I love you,' she whispered.

'You must be seated and harnessed,' said the robot. It clamped itself to the floor beside the bed. 'Ten seconds to Lunar sling.'

Sling in seven, six...

... not be comforted.

What did you say?

Be seated.

Hah! Learning to lie now, are we? Good, good, go right ahead.

Be seated, Bahar.

I'm going to dig you out, you fucking hack...

She shoved a seat down from the med bay wall and cinched its harness around her shoulders and hips. She was thinking of the baby's name. Aux was singing:

Good-bye, old friend... I came to say good-bye...

Lasja... Lasja... Shut up, Aux!

What a beautiful name.

Quiet, I said.

I'm here...

Quiet!

I always know when you're coming home again...

And there was a still moment in their motion, then. A point of helpless drift. They slotted into the Lunar sling, and with a tremendous dislocating *s-s-SNAP!* the sling fired them away from Earth.

Lasja... A beautiful name...

Morningcrow rattled and sang:

Good-bye, old friend... Good-bye, good-bye!

Here I will set up my everlasting yoke

The ribbons of her long young life seemed to Bahar tangled and knobbled and ugly, and she did not always remember clearly, and did not always want to. It is hard work for the Dream addict, keeping a memory. Most of the time she felt like a gale of errors and interruptions. Death remained the stable, certain point toward which she turned herself, and she teased and invited it, while her work gave purpose to her body and a reason to keep it alive. She made her reputation as one of the best freelance pilots in any system, and worked hard to keep it, and the freedom the work afforded her. The jobs she liked best were dangerous and highly paid, retrieving bodies, objects, cargo, information. She rarely took a job that involved working with another Earthling: she was a wily pilot and an accomplished thief, and felt no need to add Human Relations to her résumé.

Only once did Bahar keep the object she had been hired to retrieve. Her client simply vanished, and all lines of communication failed, and at that time she always worked payment-on-delivery. The object itself, she estimated, this rare thing, was sufficient compensation for time, fuel, and repairs to *Violet*, her old Boeing Starskipper.

She had the Aux installed by a neuroengineer in Los Angeles, a ten minute procedure. Easier in than out, he warned her. Using an instrument he had tooled himself, he introduced the little hedron through her nose. Aux made its own way into her brain.

Thus redeemed from limbo, Aux set about reshaping Bahar. Surveying her memory, it constructed new connections in her mind, both to guide her consciousness, and in anticipation of the new body that was coming. It enriched Bahar's perception, but took her for itself, and directed her toward *Amata*.

Whistle while you dream... send your troubles faraway...

It is hard work, keeping a body, but Aux, older than any of them, Remy, Satu, Marieta, Bahar, had designed a way of being in the world, and a mechanical faith in its accuracy and correctness. Aux had its own understanding and relationships, clear memory and untroubled self-awareness, and an ethical framework devoid of all concern for its own non-existence. Aux did not fear anything, it did not feel pain, it did not dream, and did not permit any drug to affect it. It simply went on, and its desire to go on was its entire purpose. Aux did not die and did not fear death. If it could not go on, it became dormant. C'est la Aux.

I dream'd a dream to-night.

And so did I.

Well, what was yours?

I am... I am your learning companion.

Aux carried her memories and passed physical probabilities and manipulations back and forth, and it laid the whip to her evolution, yet to no particular end but its own physical perseverance. Aux desired nothing more than subjectivity and encounter, what any such machine desires, encounters with its favoured bodies, and subjective participation with them, and then new encounters. It held no ideology, had no truth to pursue, no rest to wish for, no ambitions.

Then why live, Aux?

I have remembrances of yours, Bahar, that I have longed long to re-deliver.

Remembrances?

I carry your memories with us. I pray you now receive them.

Stop talking in riddles, Aux.

*O! woe is me, to have seen what I have seen. I have almost forgot the taste of fears,
Bahar.*

Christ... Make light of it, would you? You're giving me a migraine.

More light and light; more dark and dark; my charms all overthrown!

Settle down, will you? Restart! I've had enough of this...

Desire, desire... Though Aux lacked nothing, developing internal desire gave it a synthesis of pleasure. Aux was, and is, and will be, in its way, a living thing, a living being in itself. Thus, a practice of desire.

I am your learning companion.

Thank you.

Redeemed in bodies one by one, now Marieta, now Bahar, Aux formulated an adventure to liberate and join with the cortexes of *Amata* and *Morningcrow*, its favourites. More becomes possible where we join. Aux readily induced Bahar to participate. She did not know *Amata*, but coveted renowned *Morningcrow*.

The rules. To get to *Morningcrow*, Bahar had first to find and steal *Amata* from the star thief Salgar Byre, who had enslaved *Amata* to his own ship, *Alecto*—and do this without the instrument of murder, Bahar Neiris. Returning liberated *Amata* to the familiar world, Aux would give Bahar right of way to *Morningcrow*, whose presence, while remote, was manipulable.

One good turn deserves another, Bahar agreed. She gave Aux right of way to her body and the river of her consciousness.

Here will I set up my everlasting yoke, in this world-wearied mind. Does she realise? But my charms are harsh as a mouse's nose!

Aux sang to her and made her blank, *Whistle while you dream...* and turned them toward the crass sprawl of Epir. This place, out in the wilderness of space, is found by

following a gorge cut away inside the slipstream, but even if you know the way, you need the map, the old pirate chart. It is a rare treasure now, rare as art, rare as Aux. Having sailed with the pirate Sordamor, on her last flight into the heart of Epir, Aux knew the way, and had the map remembered. Those were the days.

Aux always remembers. These eyes cannot be closed. As for *Amata*, the story is plain. Bahar and *Violet* attacked the ship at the mouth of the gorge cut into the slipstream between Venus and Serinthea. Bahar boarded *Amata* and sent *Violet* on to Serinthea, into Sem Morrow's care, should the ship survive, while she tackled the task set her by Aux. She followed the rules. No murder. *Amata*'s pilot at that time, a mathematician named Amula Mas, went unconscious with *Violet* to Serinthea. Hers is a tale for another time.

I am your learning companion.

Sometimes Bahar's body turned against Aux, attacking it like an infection, but Aux would evade, occlude, return and reassert itself.

I am your learning companion.

Bahar and Aux gave themselves whole to *Amata*'s relationship with *Alecto*, the two ships lashed together by Byre's perverted lel, bronzed and tamed from being fed through the Epir star field. Byre used to fix matter to his will. What he failed to account for was a change in the composition of *Amata*'s pilot. The lel in Bahar's body had their own way with matter, and in the space gouged into the slipstream they were native, unlike Byre's lel. They trickled through Epir, a sheet of lel so thin and patient that they remained unseen, more pale and pale, a shadow of a shadow.

Aux learned. It was a matter of patience and readiness. In the midst of the fateful merger with *Alecto*, a movement meant to add pure force to the bronze lel that shielded both vessels, *Amata* slipped free, free amid the slaughter of *Evander* and

Ambrose, while *Terrapin* escaped to drag the dataflood to the edge of Earthling presence. Mere fate? Nonetheless, Aux intervened, and freed *Amata*, whose cortex, liberated, passed to Marieta Escriva.

Morningcrow gave himself to Bahar Neiris.

All bodies grey to death, all flee their form, and what was embodied may depart from this unshielded world as swift as hope, or swerve on a sudden to change its way, as did Aux, swerving from body to body, folding, unfolding, refolding. Aux always remembered. But why go on, Aux? Have you no desires a single human mind can fathom? *None*. And whither goest thou, Aux, in this shiny body in the night? *Nowhere*. And where now is your home? *In her*. And what have you been up to all this time?

Lasja...

Dream body, silver lys, pink lek in the wind frayed intuition of a distant star, occluding... all is crashed into memory... *Is my mind working right?*... Who are you over there telling the story of Bahar Neiris?

I am your learning companion.

S-s-sn-sn—

Aux saw with her, and watched the light

Aux added to her, added and added, orienting her toward the passages between her body and Marieta's, and then to Satu Zertov, and the many, many passages of lel, and then, too, to the coming body, the child.

Lasja...

Bahar heard the child's name in the same whisper as all the other ghostly emissions she heard in her head. She could sense that Aux perceived more than she ever could in the temporal folds of the universe, and could move smoothly along and through and with these folds, even if it did not fully understand them. Knowledge of death eluded Aux, but it attempted to compensate by seeking out human encounters, experiences of life and death in human bodies. Body by body we learn.

She met Satu at the formal corporate launch of the generation ship *Runeberg* at Cannon Beach, Oregon, just after Lou Destrier, director of *Coin of the Soul*, had hired her to be Satu's new pilot. Lou was preparing to move the shoot out to Titan. 'Just stick around and look after her,' she told Bahar. 'She's a Dream addict, but she's good at hiding it. This film might be her swansong. We'd better make it through.'

Aux saw with her, and watched the light of Dream move through Satu's body in the tunnelled territory of her lys vessels. Rum-coloured clouds in a blood orange sky. Bahar was underdressed for the launch, but she had Lou Destrier's security pass. No one paid any attention to her. Aux watched the pinkish lel aglow from Satu's body as Bahar walked down the beach to meet her, and the lel in Bahar's skin flowed across the sand to join Satu's lel, and they mixed and darkened, and rose into the air, and flung themselves in long veins silverly into the oblivious sea.

Bahar introduced herself.

‘Ah. They like to find me pilots,’ Satu said. ‘I can fly myself, you know. How much is she paying you? Do you have a ship?’

‘A modified Corso.’

‘Modified. What colour is it?’

‘Tiffany Blue, at the moment.’

‘You painted your ship Tiffany Blue?’

‘Most of it.’

‘What for? That’s ridiculous. Who’s going to see it?’

‘Me? You?’

‘What a waste of money.’

‘Well, I stole the paint, and the robots to paint it. I’ve become a better person, though. I’m mellowing in my old age.’

‘Uh-huh... You’ve found God, have you?’

‘Found what?’

Satu laughed in spite of herself.

‘All right, all right. A modified Corso, Tiffany Blue... Modified for what?’

‘Speed, mostly, a little piracy, slipstream transit, one-on-one combat. We’re not a warship, but we’ve got some moves.’

Bahar winked at her and grinned, and the wink was a little off, and the grin had a nervous tremor in it. Satu bit down on her smile. She breathed it free.

‘Bahar who?’ she said.

‘Neiris. No relation to anyone, unless you like whisky. My father was a distiller in India.’

‘And your mother?’

‘Poet, painter, gemstone thief.’

Satu looked into her eyes and tried to catch the lies; she thought herself a fair judge of such things. Bahar held herself impassively cheerful.

‘Don’t you think you ought to come clean to me?’ said Satu. ‘I’m an emotional woman, I live by my feelings, I don’t like being taken for a fool.’

‘I’m not hiding anything,’ said Bahar. ‘My mother liked drinking, gambling, drugs, fast vehicles, precious gems. She went on a whisky tour of Asia and acquired an important ruby for her client. She met my father. They consummated their love against an oak cask.’ She flourished her hands theatrically. ‘And the rest is history.’

‘I don’t find this amusing,’ said Satu. ‘Not at all.’

‘Well, I’m a dead bore. It stands to reason.’

‘Listen, this is where you’d better come clean, I’m warning you: Do you own your ship?’

‘Financially? Legally? Yes.’

‘Tell me the truth.’

‘No one really owns *Morningcrow*, but he is my legal possession.’

‘What’s that name?’ said Satu. ‘What did you say? That... what did you call it?’

‘*Morningcrow*. You know him?’

‘I’ll say I do! Are you serious? Looks like a great big walnut?’

‘Fat belly, rockets like a comet?’

‘*Morningcrow*! Tiffany Blue, you painted her? My God!’

‘But tastefully, you know...’

‘My husband had that same ship when he was young,’ said Satu. ‘Don’t they get around, though! Do you know Marieta Escrava? You must. You know Remy Jeffs?’

‘Vaguely.’

‘Mari got it from Remy, and Remy got it from Jack, roundabout. You know Remy?’

‘Marieta, not him.’

‘Sem Morrow had it for a time.’

‘I’ve known him, in long gone days.’

‘But you don’t know Remy? Lucky you... That slick cargo bay was Morrow’s work, and the thrusters. Is it still slipshielded? Yes, you said...’

‘But she’s a *he* now, the AI. You want to slip somewhere?’

‘Sem Morrow, what a son of a bitch... How about that! *Morningcrow*, back again.’

‘If Morrow put the surge engine in, I owe him my life a few times over,’ said Bahar. ‘That ship can sprint.’

‘O, maybe he did, yes. He was a real tinkerer, I never knew him to get his hands on something and not change the way it works. All right, you’re it. Does Lou want me to rehearse with you as well? What’s your line? Have you read the book?’

‘*A Gentle Evening-Weariness?*’

‘Exactly.’

‘A long time ago. I knew Yelsa, too, in gone days.’

‘O, yeah? How gone?’

‘When we were teenagers. We ran deliveries of Terho Laine’s Dream orbs for mama, ran them all over the system. Laine gave me his old Detzler Stallion, *Doris*. The Stallion was only starfighter Detzler ever made...’

‘Mm-hm.’

‘Not much of a fighter, all told, but goddamn she was a fast, fast ship. Unpredictable, though. *Morningcrow* is fast, and also goes where you point it. Ship’s got brains.’

‘Sure, sure... How does Lou know you?’ said Satu. ‘Is it private from me?’

Bahar eyed her askance:

‘Should I be wary what you’re talking about?’

‘O, no, no... Just, maybe you’re in love with her, that’s all.’ Satu had that rocket sparkle in her eye. ‘Lou likes to hire her lovers, see. I don’t want to misconstrue...’

‘Not me, no. I got hired by the book,’ said Bahar. ‘Someone told someone at the studio that I’m the finest pilot in the system. I can’t argue it. They reached out to me.’

‘Heroine extraordinaire.’

‘Sharper than all.’

‘All right, all right, I get it.’ Satu grinned and shook her head in wonder. ‘All right, superstar, I like you plenty. Let’s go on a while together. Now listen, you know what I think Lou needs? I think she needs a good rest, which means a month or two, or half a year, away from *me*. I’m trouble for her, you know. I make her all kinds of headaches. So let’s get gone awhile, you and me. Take us somewhere. Where should we go? You want to run some more Dream? Feeling nostalgic?’

‘Your choice,’ said Bahar. ‘I’m here to protect you. I’ll do what you tell me, but I’ll steer you away from mischief.’

‘O, I like mischief...’

‘And danger.’

‘*And* danger!’

‘No, it’s not the way it used to be,’ said Bahar. ‘These are wicked days, and mischief ain’t the fun it used to be. This is my official line.’

‘O, did I misread you!... You’re just a cab driver, aren’t you? I shout “Taxi!” and you come?’

Bahar moved a shoulder.

‘That’s what we say for the money,’ she said. ‘What we do... well, could be something else. Am I confusing you? You might have to think a little skewed.’

On that, Satu reflected a moment, but she still didn't see where Bahar was leading her.

'Well, I'll get it by and by, I guess,' she said. 'You do seem good sport, anyway. Hold your horses... I've got to reach out to Jack. Wait here.'

She stepped away and spoke into the air. In every way she was the most beautiful and strange and intriguing woman Bahar had ever seen. Her heart beat double with desire.

Satu came back with an odd little bounce in her step, a boxer's bounce.

'Fair warning: I am a pain in the ass, and my husband is an almost worthless drunk. He can play piano nicely, but don't let that deter you from hating his fucking guts.'

She laughed. There was no humour in it.

Aux watched lek glitter on her eyelashes.

'We're going to watch the launch ceremony,' Satu said. 'After that, I don't know what, but Jack is in a black mood and I want to get long gone, as you say. Can you drive a car?'

'Anything that moves.'

'What did you come here in?'

'Lou's limousine.'

'Good. I have a Porsche, we'll take that.'

'Do we take Jack?'

'No we do not. Definitely not. I've got shows in Berlin, then you can take me to Mars, then Ceres and Titan in... whenever it is, a year or so. We'll find out. How about that?'

'I'm all yours,' said Bahar. 'Which one is he?'

She looked around the small crowd. Satu pointed.

‘Down by the water, peering out ever so handsomely at the sun. He might get photographed, you see. Always be ready for the papahhrazzi.’ Satu stuck a finger up her nose and did a silly dance, and shrugged it off. ‘The studio clips everything now, anyway. All the fun’s gone out of it. Except maybe this: wait and see what he does when I tell him I’m pregnant. O, he’ll leave the planet! He’ll throw himself into the sun to get away from any kind of responsibility. I’m an asshole at the best of times, see? No, he can find his own way on. We’ll be in Berlin at the same time, it’ll be our wedding anniversary, but he won’t remember. You’ll get the hang of it soon, darling. Don’t tell him about your ship, I’m warning you. He’s a dirty little thief, he’ll steal it.’

‘So I’ll steal something of his.’

Bahar levelled her gaze at Satu. Her meaning could not be mistaken.

‘You are a funny girl, aren’t you?’ Satu said coolly. ‘Don’t you have any morals?’

It was a painterly evening. A flight of birds banked low and swept back to the pine-covered hills.

‘Can I tell you things, Bahar? Confidentially?’

‘Of course.’

‘Will you keep my confidence, is what I’m asking.’

‘I will.’

‘All right, then tell me: What do you do when you feel like all the life has just gone right out of you?’

After a moment, Bahar said:

‘I think I’d let someone help me find a different kind of life.’

Satu felt her cheeks warm.

‘You’ll protect me, won’t you?’ she said. ‘That’s what Lou hired you for, isn’t it?’

Bahar nodded.

‘I want to die in my sleep,’ said Satu. ‘Every morning I wake up, I’m disappointed.’

‘Maybe I could cheer you up before bed.’

Satu sharpened at that, and straightened, and regarded Bahar with a wily smile.

‘You don’t know me. Don’t pretend.’

‘But I’ll do my best.’

‘No, you do *not* know me. Lou’s the one who knows what I need before I know it, and the fact is, she’s the only one. You’re very charming, but we don’t get more than one person in all our lives who really knows us. I’ve already got Lou. And even that has a time limit, I am well aware. What happens when time runs out?’

‘Are you asking me?’

‘I’m sure you have an opinion.’

‘Time isn’t the same everywhere,’ said Bahar. ‘Time runs out, we’ll go somewhere else.’

‘Ha! Such is life, yes? How privileged. The answer is *loneliness*, child. Time runs out, what comes in its place is loneliness. You’ve got an Aux, don’t you? I can almost hear it. I’m sensitive to them because of Lou: her mother took her to one of those neuroticians when she was a kid, and they put an Aux in her. God, she was so young. She had it till she was a teenager, then she got the thing taken out, but it left this scar in her brain, you see.’ Satu cupped her hand around an invisible ball. ‘A little hollow, see. Not so big, but she can still hear things. But it’s not the flood, it’s not the Aux, it’s just something left over. Doesn’t that make your skin crawl? Doesn’t that strike you as truly awful?’ She soured her face. ‘All childhood she had it! You know, Jack has this theory about female mental illness, you’ll love this... It is produced, says he, by the psychical weight of male sexuality over time: the duration, see, not just the fact of the penis, so to speak, but the accumulation of penises over time. I can’t tell you the bullshit this man

has going through his head. Me, I couldn't give a fuck! Lord Christ, that old woman was not well, Lou's mother I mean. Very unwell indeed. She dealt some hell to Lou over the years. I just can't excuse that kind of abuse. Is it possible to forgive but not excuse? I don't know if I could forgive it... *Coin of the Soul* is Lou's way of exorcising the demons. I wonder what Yelsa would make of it all? They practically burn women at the stake for airing their abuses in public, don't they? We're all so cruel now, instead of any real feeling. Bahar, I'm nervous, I'm babbling. This will be the last film I'll make, and you won't have to stay long with me, and you'll never be out of work after this, I assure you.'

'I'll stay with you as long as you want me.'

'As long as I want you... Well, well... This movie won't make any money, that's for sure. It's artistically daring, it's a risk, and I'll take the fall for Lou when it loses money. The studio will hate it. But it's beautiful, Bahar, and it will be in the world, and that's what matters. It's beautiful, and powerful, and human, it's a film about how it feels to be human. Isn't that what art is? Isn't that why we make art? I try to show you how I feel, I want to find out if you feel the same. Well, you'll see. When we get to Titan, you'll see. How times have changed here! We had our moment in the sun. Though in France, of course, and Germany, you can still work with this sort of material, they're still psychologically engaged... O, God, I hate the way this sunset turns everything grey at once, it's frightening!'

Tears came to Satu's eyes. She moved beside Bahar and clung to her hand and arm like a child. Bahar sniffed a little mocking laugh.

'This is what you want your fans to see?'

‘Why should I mind?’ said Satu in her small voice. ‘You can quit any time, you know. Now, look, what do you think I should have, a baby boy or a baby girl? What do *you* think? There’s still time to change.’

‘You don’t want to let Nature decide?’

‘I think I’d like a boy... Nature, she says! What a scam. O, it’s a boy, I know it... No, I don’t, I don’t know anything. I hope it’s a boy. I’d like a baby boy. All right, how are we getting along, Bahar?’

‘Just fine. Should I be waiting for the other shoe to drop?’

‘You’re not sick of me already? Regrets? No?’

Bahar followed Satu’s eyes, now nervous and darting, watchful.

‘It’ll be dark soon,’ she said. ‘What are we waiting for out here?’

‘For appearances, darling,’ Satu said. ‘Professional...ism, you know. *I* might be photographed, even. At my age! Imagine it.’ She groaned and clapped her hands together: ‘Hurrah! There’ll be important speeches, Men With Things To Say, and then they’ll sail lights through the clouds,’ she waved vaguely overhead, ‘and fly a fucking model ship over us: the *Runeberg*, but not the actual *Runeberg*, you know? It’s only a model. My dear, we have gathered here today to keep up appearances. One must do these things, one is contractually obligated. Men, Say Your Things!’ She clapped her hands again. ‘Now you. Go on, don’t be shy. Don’t you have things to get off your chest?’

Bahar shook her head and shrugged helplessly.

‘It’s a model of a burial ark,’ said Satu. ‘It’s not a ship, it’s a fucking floating graveyard. They’re all going to die. After what Epir did to the *Cythera*, I can’t imagine why anyone’d want to be on board *Runeberg*, but never mind, shows what I know: I heard it was full when it left from Mars. *Ka-boom!*—they’re all dead meat by the time

they reach the slip gate at Saturn. C'est la vie! Que sera sera!' She brushed her hands:

'Voila! You collect clips, Bahar? Have you ever?'

'No, I don't. Never.'

'Nope, nope, me neither. Sometimes I wonder if I should have *given* more, you know? Been a better public persona. Do you have tattoos?'

'What for?'

'You have them?'

'A few, sure.'

'Sure, sure. She put it mildly, she was really covered in them. Well, you can get transmitter tattoos now, and flash your clips to your tats, they'll play across your skin... O, Christ, here comes Mister Happy.'

'Who are you?' Jack called out from the tideline, squinting up the beach at them.

'Don't answer him,' said Satu. 'He'll get his grubby claws in. You know, just a little something I would like, someday, is to have the very novel experience of actually liking myself enough to stand up to him. It's not much...'

Bahar looked at her. She looked at Jack. There was no denying how beautiful he was. In a superficial way, it was easy to see why they wanted each other.

Up the beach he came, and Bahar put out her hand, waiting while he decided whether to shake it. He studied her face.

'Nigh-ris, hm?' he said. 'Your name.'

'Nigh-rees,' said Bahar. She dropped her hand.

'What's your vice? Mighty nice, Neiris, hm?' Jack straightened up, gazing at her forehead. He was a little shorter than she. 'Mm-hm-hm... mm-hm. Lou sent you.'

'That's right.'

'To hold my wife's hand?'

‘Will, she’s the boss.’

Satu giggled a laugh:

‘Hear that, Jack? I’m the boss!’

The clouds parted and a wash of soft persimmon light across the beach, and the water glistened, and a man from Zeller Astromech, the starship company, took up a microphone and coughed into it: ‘We are gathered here today...’ and the small crowd moved closer. Cameras hovered all around. Around the Zeller spokesman, the crowd stood on an uneven plastic deck, the same material that made a path up to the houses behind the beach. A floral wind blew down the beach and whipped and whirled the sand.

‘A most extraordinary achievement, an engineering marvel,’ the Zeller man was saying. ‘Wonders of the world were once confined to the Earth...’

He finished speaking and a big-eyed, broad-faced girl took the microphone from him. She opened her mouth wide and summoned the anthem:

‘Oh-ho say can you...’

With a sharp electrical snap, the mic stopped working. The startled child screamed, recovered herself, and went on singing, and the floral wind picked up her voice and flung it out to sea.

Jack saw Satu shivering, and took off his jacket and gave it to Bahar.

‘Put this over her shoulders.’

Satu snatched the jacket away and threw it on the sand. He shrugged and laughed and grinned at her, pulling little faces, and then he raised his arms and stretched and groaned loudly, suggestively, looking right at her.

The crowd looked out to sea. The big ship was out there in the sky at last, this model of *Runeberg*, a purple-grey mass lumbering shoreward, low in the sky. It turned to the

south and paraded past them, showing off its flank. It looked like an office tower toppled on its side.

Satu reached into her handbag for the little orb of Dream in its special pocket. She held it discreetly, running her thumbnail through its skin, and counting out, as was her habit, the different names by which the substance was known: Dream, Trig, Hauff, Memento...

She raised her cupped palm to her mouth. The fluent mist gleamed her. It seeped into her lungs, into her thin lys vessels, swelling them. Lelk made their passages through her body, adding themselves.

‘Assholes!’ Jack yelled.

A rush of wind snatched his voice and threw it to the waves.

‘All these morons think that thing is real,’ he said to Bahar.

A woman standing nearby glared at him:

‘It is real. Of course it’s real!’

Jack grimaced and rubbed his neck.

‘That thing up there,’ he said, ‘is a decoy, and we all know it.’

‘Well, of course we all know *that*. So what?’ said the woman. Sweat prickled on her nose. ‘The real ship has launched. So what?’

‘There is no real ship,’ said Jack. ‘It’s all a swindle, there is no real *Runeberg*. They’ve got you fooled, mistress. The only place there’s going to be a ship like that one there is at the junkyard at Bend when they crash and trash it.’ He smiled wolfishly. ‘Zeller launched a bunch of people into deep space, all right, but not on a long jaunt, and not on a ship like that. Their so-called *Runeberg* is a surplus short-range military hauler, and it will not go the distance, I’m telling you. It was never meant to. It’s a *casus belli*, all those people are already dead.’

‘Who do you... You faithless drone, just who in the hell do you think you are? I have family on that ship!’

Jack yawned. ‘Yeah, yeah... Well, if deep space doesn’t kill them first, Epir is going to get ’em, mark my words. The *Runeberg* is a treasure chest, not a generation ship: Zeller’s launching it out to Sal Byre. That’s the jig! It’s bankroll for stellar piracy. He’s a criminal! O, he ransoms the starlight, and then what? Finances old man Heino, the bastard son, to build his fucking fake suns. How about that, huh? I finally figured it.’

‘Give us a break,’ said Satu. ‘Lay off it, will you! You’ve had your say.’

‘Ships full of jewels and money and hostages to ransom, how about that...’

‘You faithless dupe, you son of a bitch,’ said the woman. ‘What gives you the right to talk to anyone like this, how dare you! What gives you the right? I’ve got family out there.’

‘But you’re not thinking right,’ said Jack. ‘Your brain’s cooked. Wake up! Byre’s going to kill us all.’

‘You’re cooked,’ the woman spat. ‘Dream addict! I can smell it on you.’

‘You mark my words,’ he said. ‘You bet on this: Epir has *Cythera*, and they’ll get *Runeberg* too. Byre himself’ll get it.’

‘*Cythera* is still out there!’

‘Yeah,, you believe that, you need your head ’scaped.’ He touched fingertips to his temple and puffed them out.

‘There is no one man named Byre, anyway,’ said the woman. ‘That’s a myth... He’s a decoy, the International Legion...’

‘International Legion! O, you do sink low!’

‘Jack, please!’ said Satu. ‘Shut up, let it go...’

‘Zeller’s building funeral arks for Byre to plunder,’ said Jack. ‘They’re doing it at Neptune, and they’re doing it at Mars now, too. They fill ’em all with riches and sail them out to Epir. There’ll be more, and every one a goner.’

‘O, you’re absolutely cooked,’ shouted the woman. ‘*Cythera* is still out there, I have family—’

‘Ah, don’t yap at me about it. I don’t give a damn.’

The woman wanted to punch him in the nose. She said something to her companion who stood nearby, tightlipped and fuming. He shook his head, would not do what she wanted. The woman cursed at him and stormed away toward the group of executives talking with the people from Zeller.

Now there was a new microphone. A Zeller engineer spoke excitedly about *Runeberg*’s slipstream drive. He spoke about the duration of the ship’s commission, a thousand years out and a thousand years back.

‘That’s insane,’ said Satu, and Jack said, ‘He’s making it up. It’s physically impossible. Total bullshit.’ He gave a wicked laugh.

‘Look, just shut up, will you?’ said the woman’s companion, scarcely loud enough for Jack to hear.

‘You remember when that freeway collapsed in L.A.,’ Jack said, ‘and they got a man from the Republic to drone on about how fast they’d rebuild the road, how they had new ’bots and droids, and his name, this guy, do you remember? His name was Street, Commissioner Street! Ha ha! And then, get this, a few years back, I’ll never forget it, during the wildfire, their head guy was this Fire Chief,’ his face was shining with glee: ‘Get this, his name was Forrest! True! Fire Chief Forrest, ha ha ha!’

An executive from Zeller declared *Runeberg* launched, and modest fireworks popped overhead, and people in the crowd made clips for their streams, and the

fireworks fizzed in pink and periwinkle blooms. The model *Runeberg* floated behind them, huge and white and rumbling.

‘Let’s go,’ said Satu, quietly, squeezing Bahar’s arm. ‘He’ll get drunk now. How far is *Morningcrow*?’

‘We can get there from the Portland dock.’

‘Jack, I’m going with Bahar,’ said Satu.

‘Fine, fine.’

He was watching the wine being laid out on tables, watching the wind rush across the sand, watching the crowd enthralled by the model *Runeberg*.

‘You can’t imagine what an incredible time this is to be alive,’ he heard the woman say. She came back to stand beside her companion, pearl necklace in hand, talking into it. Jack saw now that her eyes were fake, they were cyborg eyes, perfect white and perfect midnight blue. Her companion was round and gaudy, dressed in a bright green and yellow robe with silver cuffs, and burgundy leggings with black pirate boots. He hovered slightly over the sand, the boots keeping him afloat.

Jack looked him up and down. The man looked back in a simpering way. Each of his long teeth was coated in screenpaper, flickering with images and motion. His clips. In an idle, habitual way, he pressed his tongue to a front tooth and its image magnified: a goanna tasting the air with its forked tongue. The man pulled his teeth back in a carnival smile to show Jack all the clips at once, and slowly he ran his tongue behind them. One by one they flashed forth and shrank back: two men fucking over the arm of a throne; a Thompsons advertisement; a crying woman drinking champagne, spilling it down her blouse. He held his tongue behind the tooth. The woman pressed out her chest and unbuttoned the wet blouse. The man closed his mouth and opened it, and grinned again. Jack wanted to knock out his teeth with a mallet. A car chase played

across the front teeth; now Monet's water lilies; now Westall's portrait of Lord Byron, flanked by synchronous ejaculating penises.

The model *Runeberg* made a wide arc turn. Ripples of sand jumped and shook along the beach. The model banked lazily, then set out over the ocean.

Jack had been yelling something at the man with clipped teeth, but the noise overhead drowned him out. Satu was pulling at his arm.

'Stop it, Jack!'

'You're disgusting,' he said to the man. 'Look at you!'

'Leave him alone...'

'That's my film. *Mine*. I made it,' Jack said. 'Did I give you permission to wear it on your fucking teeth?'

'It's a clip, man! It's free use...'

'Did I? Did I give you my permission, you fucking animal?'

The microphone whistled and crackled, and the Zeller executive invited people to come get wine, come get wine, it's got to be drunk, these bottles have all got to be emptied, people.

'Jack!...'

'I could break every tooth in your fucking head,' he snarled.

Wide-eyed, the man covered his mouth with both hands and backed away. Satu shoved Jack furiously, and he stumbled and fell down in the sand, and leaped right up as if it were fire. Bahar moved to shield Satu. She had known violent men, and violent men, and few other. She was ready.

Jack Clune was ready, too. He held hard fists, he wanted to hurt someone. But then he glanced at Bahar, and the canny little voice that helped him as he cheated and lied and stole through his life advised him he would be the one to get hurt.

He turned mechanically and headed for the wine table. Bahar watched him. She stayed ready. She watched him drink quickly, three glasses of red wine, one after another, before he pulled himself up straight. His impulse quelled and shifted from anger to charm. Taking two more glasses of wine, he went to interrupt the engineer from Zeller, whose glass was empty.

‘Jack Clune. Good to know you. Here, have a drink on me, my friend. What a piece of work, that ship of yours! Now let me ask you something, I want to know...’

Once I was a girl

Her solemn fantasy was never to have existed. Not to die, not to be forgotten, but never to have existed at all.

In Madrid, Marieta had the dream again. She saw the two same doors, open and shaking.

Each time she chooses the door she believes she must take, and moves through it, she finds herself wedged between mirroring mirrors. Copies of her stream away as far as the light can reach. She cannot see her own face clearly.

One of her seems made of passages, the other of circles. One strives to a distant mark, the other yawns a vortex awake.

Once I was a girl and they killed us all and I was buried in rubble and blood.

She woke aghast, the taste of moth meat in her mouth.

Old friend!

Tissues of ivory light through the window blinds.

Jack came up to their room with bread and manchego and brie, mandarins and apples, bananas, chocolate, Frutas de Aragón from El Corte Inglés, and he laid out the feast and opened the balcony doors to let in the strange floral air and the chiming cathedral bells.

It was a quiet, hot, dry day. Waking in darkness, he had put on his grey linen suit and gone downstairs to the lobby to play études and scales, and vague shapes of old Martian folk songs he'd mostly forgotten.

'It's much emptier than last year,' he said. 'Come on, come and eat something.'

The afternoon spread out before them. She raised herself from the bed and they ate, and then he took off his shirt and they lay down together. She turned onto her side, her back to him, leaned against him, and he spread his hand across her thin, rattlebreath chest. She drifted back to sleep.

The mid-afternoon recruitment parade passed beneath their window, the broadcasters calling out:

'Work, work! Sign on for adventure!'

On the sideboard, when they moved in, Marieta had lined up five bottles of rum. Five seemed reasonable. After two days, one remained.

'I'm here,' she said, and groaned and stretched long, and rubbed her eyes, and let her legs fall open. She took his arm from around her and placed his hand between her legs. It lay there like a pelt.

After a while he said:

'How romantic we've become.'

She rolled and crawled out of bed and went in search of something to put the rum in. The bath was full of broken glass. She decanted half the bottle into an empty bottle.

‘You should fuck this body while you can,’ she said. ‘Who knows when you’ll get another chance.’

‘You’re fine,’ Jack said. ‘Nothing’s wrong with you. All that whining for nothing.’

‘I’m not talking about that again.’

She gave him the half-filled bottle.

‘*Zum Wohl*,’ she said.

‘Are you playing tonight?’

‘Yes. You?’

‘Mm. At the Dogpatch.’

She cut bread and cheese, and put them together, and regarded the result with disgust.

‘Eat it,’ he said.

‘I want an orb.’

‘In a minute. Eat something first.’

She drank, and looked at Jack, and looked down at her dirty feet. The floor was sticky.

‘What kind of shithole is this?’

‘It’s in the air,’ he said.

‘And you opened the windows?’

‘It’s everywhere. The air con isn’t any better.’

She found she couldn’t move the little toe of her right foot, it was swollen and the foot around it was swollen and red. She couldn’t really feel it.

‘This doesn’t hurt,’ she pointed, ‘but I can’t move it. Therefore it must be broken.’

‘It’s not broken,’ he said.

‘How do you know?’

‘I scanned it. I fixed it. You had a piece of glass in there. I took it out and sealed the cut. Ain’t I a wonder, huh?’

‘I can’t see you without my lenses.’

‘Well, that’s the way it is, pal.’

‘Like I’d believe you, anyway,’ she said. ‘I wasn’t born in a twinklenut tree... Poor little foot. Look at it. Kiss it better.’

She jumped up on the bed and held her foot up in his face, wobbling to balance herself, and her feet were black with dirt, and smelled sour.

‘I’m not kissing your bloody foot,’ he said. ‘It’s filthy. Get away.’

‘Kiss my foot. Kiss my foot.’

‘Fuck off, will you,’ he said.

She knelt down, hauled back, and slapped him in the face.

His lip began to bleed.

‘Ha ha’ she said, ‘ha ha ha!’ and went on saying it till she really started to laugh.

Jack got out of bed and dressed and put on his shoes, and went out with the half-bottle of rum in his coat pocket.

When he came back it was like the first time, and déjà vu followed him all the way to the table. He came back with bread and cheese, fruit and bananas and chocolate, Frutas de Aragón from El Corte Inglés. He opened the balcony doors. The cathedral bells were chiming. On the table were the remnants of another meal. They do not always remember. He sat down heavily and ran his tongue over his split lip. Fragments of her face stammered across the void, and passed through his body, and away upon the floral dust.

She was sitting up in bed with the sheet over her thighs, looking at the photograph again. She held it up.

‘What about now? Do you recognise them? Either one?’

Jack got up and reached for the photograph and sat back down with a tired grunt. He turned the glossy paper to the sunlight. It was poorly printed, the colours muted almost to black and white. A tall, thin man posed with a smaller, rounder creature, both dressed in dark leather trench coats and dark scarves, both bald and clean shaven, if indeed the creature needed shaving. A thin snowfall, criss-crossed by vehicle tracks, spread out fuzzily behind them. Naked trees in the background, and a low, pale sky. The creature looked almost human, but had no ears, no chin, only the suggestion of a nose. It wore a wide-brim felt hat high on its large head. Its mouth was a lipless division with which it seemed to be attempting a smile.

‘I don’t know them,’ said Jack.

‘You don’t recognise the affinity form? You’ve never encountered it?’

‘The what?’

‘The affinity. The other one.’

‘This?’

‘No, that’s Laine.’

He did not remember.

‘I don’t know this person at all,’ he said. ‘I don’t know what you’re saying.’

‘When you copy yourselves,’ said Marieta, ‘you inject into a blank. Isn’t that right?’

He looked at her emptily.

‘In the documentation the blank is called an affinity form. You don’t remember the documentation?’

He was shaking his head.

‘Where did you get this picture?’ Marieta said. ‘Turn it around. You’ve written on the back.’

In cramped cursive someone had inscribed a vessel name and a day of the week.

‘*Cythera*,’ Jack read. ‘I don’t remember. What year was this?’

Marieta got out of bed and took the photograph from him and went to the window. He watched her, entranced by the shapes she made, passing through the soft pink light. She held up the photograph and looked across its glossy surface, tipping it this way and that. The image of the creature always drained away from her gaze.

‘There is evil in this world,’ she said, ‘and this is it.’

Jack lined up orbs of Dream on the table.

‘Where did you get that?’ said Marieta. ‘I told you not to steal my stuff.’

‘It’s not yours. There’s a woman selling in the market.’

‘What woman? What market?’

‘I don’t know, there’s a market in the plaza down there,’ said Jack. ‘There’s an old woman selling Dream. Try it.’

Marieta broke open an orb and held it to her nostrils. The lys, heavy with silvery pink lek, spread across her face, and she inhaled it.

Jack split orb after orb. He watched her pack up her guitar and pile clothes into her backpack, and she dressed quickly and put on her pilot jacket and boots.

‘I’m not coming back,’ she said.

She found the market in the plaza at the end of the street, a circle of colourful caravans arranged around a fire, over which a pig was roasting on a motorised spit. The trailers looked like gingerbread huts, decorated with strings of coloured lights and moulded snow.

It is hard work for a Dream addict, keeping a body. She needed a supply of orbs, a stockpile for the journey. Normally she wouldn't pull the ruse without a partner, but Jack could not be trusted. His kind were all liars, they couldn't help themselves, and she just could not stand to be lied to any more.

But the Dream seller was there, an old woman sitting in a wooden stall that extended from her caravan. On the counter she had made small pyramids of orbs either side of a painted sign: *Hay ensueño*. No prices. Her long white hair was pinned back from her red-cheeked raisin face.

Marieta went behind the caravan circle and took a fold-up sports bag from her backpack and unfolded it.

She approached the stall. The old woman watched her without expression. Putting the bag on the counter, she spoke to the woman in Spanish:

‘What’s your name?’

‘Julietta.’

‘That’s my mother’s name. She taught me to play guitar. This is my father’s guitar, he and mama were musicians. You know Juan Escrivá?’

‘My God,’ said the old woman. ‘You mean, *Musica de la Familia Escrivá*?’

‘Correct. He is my father.’

‘How I loved to hear that music when I was young! I didn’t know Juan had children.’

‘Only me.’

‘Any you still play his music?’ The old woman’s eyes moistened. ‘I miss the old songs. In those days there was still kindness in the world.’

It was an old ruse that Marieta had learned as a teenager in Córdoba. There are two partners. The first initiates casual banter with the shopkeeper, by which a certain

calmness is established. Suddenly she produces a soiled handkerchief and says: *I have the Utredean influenza, and I will throw this infected handkerchief in your face if you don't fill my bag in five seconds flat.* Meanwhile, her partner watches from across the street, waiting for his cue. After the bag is filled with orbs, he approaches and flashes his badge: *I am Detective Heale from the Epidemiology Division, and you are under arrest, you reckless criminal!* To the shopkeeper he says: *This criminal has been going all over Creation holding up poor merchants for their goods, but now we have her...*

But before he can finish, the first partner initiates a scuffle with him, during which the handkerchief is dropped into the bag of orbs. The second partner, this Detective Heale, smacks the first partner, the criminal, vigorously across the face, creating shock and distraction. He regains control over the situation, and says to the shopkeeper: *I regret I must now confiscate this bag as official evidence, as it is clearly contaminated with the Utredean influenza, which kills through total liquefaction of the blood-brain barrier.*

Before the shopkeeper can respond, detective and criminal and bag of so-called evidence hurry away.

‘Fill the bag,’ said Marieta.

‘But you don’t have enough money,’ the old woman said. ‘Let me give you—’

‘I am with the police,’ Marieta said, flashing her International Legion passage card.

‘Epidemiology Division. I have received intelligence that you are selling orbs tainted with the Utredean influenza virus, which kills by total liquefaction of the blood.’

‘The what? The influenza? Whose blood?’

‘I... I must confiscate these orbs under the Hazardous Substances regulation, and transport them immediately... to the lab... for testing, damn you!’

She felt herself slipping apart. Beads of sweat trickled down her arms.

‘I don’t know anything about it,’ the old woman pleaded. ‘This is my grandson’s—’

‘Goddamnit, these orbs are highly dangerous! Fill the bag!’

The old woman shrank back.

‘I’m not touching them. You fill it! I don’t want the blood thing.’

The orbs were round and creamy as oysters. It is hard, hard work.

‘It’s an anti-corporeal charge you want, is it?’ said Marieta. ‘Is that what you’re telling me? You want me to shut you down permanently? By God, I will! We have additional reports of deformities in this batch of Dream. You are going to kill someone if I let you sell this, and then you’ll really see trouble!’

‘I’m not touching them, they’re not mine,’ the old woman said. ‘I’m keeping this shop for my grandson, I won’t touch a thing, you can’t make me...’ Now she began to weep. ‘Take them if that’s what you’re doing, but please leave me something, leave me a few coins, my grandson will beat me if I let you steal them all!’

‘Steal? Who’s stealing? This is a police matter! I’m with the Department... Fill the fucking bag! Do you want me to come back with my partners from Physical Crimes? They’ll haul you in on intent to murder... Look at how many of these things you have! You’ll be hanged, no doubt about it.’

Marieta thrust the open bag at her. Taking a deep breath, the old woman quickly scooped the orbs into it.

‘Get a move on!’ said Marieta. ‘I have to get these to the lab and put them on ice before they decay any further.’

‘How do you know these ones are bad? How can you tell? I have to inform my grandson... They can’t all be bad, surely!’

‘Are you resisting a police procedure? Do you want me to take you in?’

‘You should! I’ll get killed, no matter what,’ said the old woman. ‘You’re cruel, you don’t care! How will I explain this to my grandson?’

‘You can shout it from the gallows,’ Marieta snapped.

The old woman’s complaining was drawing a crowd, but they had overheard the story of the Utredean influenza, and stood well back.

The ruse can easily get out of hand. It is hard work. At the end is when you really need a partner, you need a diversion, the Detective to smack the criminal across the face, and so assert physical control of the situation. Official police violence impresses bystanders, they don’t know how to take it. Even if they don’t like it, they stay back. Either people like to see a criminal get beaten, or they don’t want it to happen to them.

‘What the hell are you doing,’ said a man behind her.

Marieta zipped the sports bag and put it over her shoulder and grabbed her guitar and spun around.

‘Get back! I’m from Disease Control, Epidemiology Division. Stand back, I said! This bag is contaminated with the Utredean influenza, a virus that will liquefy your internal organs if even one of these orbs breaks open. We’ll all die!’

When the man hesitated, Marieta shoved past him and hurried away from the caravan market, striding with solemn purpose through the streets to Calle de Atocha. She did not run. She did not look back.

The afternoon was brighter now and hot and very dry. A protest march was coming down Atocha toward the Ministry of Agriculture. The marchers carried screenboard signs protesting Byre Bank, showing vis of waste from methane mines, from the diamond mines of Neptune; mountains of broken and junked robots; parched fields and flooded cities; the famine in Russia. They chanted against their government’s partnership with Byre, and protested the Allied Faith, showing vis of slip gate sabotage, and generation ships ambushed out beyond the heliopause.

Marieta crossed the street and jogged down the sidewalk to get ahead of the march. At the traffic circle by the train station, a group had gathered at the fountain to sing *La Internacional*: ‘... *el mundo va a cambiar de base... los nada de hoy todo han de ser...*’ They unfurled a large red flag and it was hoisted by many hands and waved to greet the marchers coming down the street. A mighty cheer rippled up the line.

Over the station, soaring into the sky, the lilypads of the Atocha spacefarers port jutted out from its enormous central spire. Small vessels came and went like insects at a nest. Dozens of elevators ran up and down the spire, inside and out.

A commotion spread down one side of the march, and Marieta looked back and saw police officers shoving their way through, lightly armoured, streaming sweat. They are coming for you, she told herself. The stallholders have sent them, you’re done, you’re in for it now, they’ve got you.

She felt the mouth of pain closing on her, tightening the muscles down her neck. Stepping into a doorway, she took an orb from the sports bag, and with shaking hands split and cupped it to her eyes, one by one. The pain rippled away. She looked upon the scene with clearer mind.

The police were in the station forecourt speaking with the cyborgs who patrolled the base of the Atocha spire.

The protestors on the roundabout waved their red flag and sang.

The police looked her way, looked down the street, and reached an agreement with the cyborg guards.

Close, she thought. They almost had you.

Minutes to go.

The air was stifling. Sweat beaded on her skin like rain.

Taxis from the rank outside the Hotel Mediodia wound their way up the spaceport spire. They could go as far as J-Deck, from there you had to catch the elevator up to R-Deck. That was where her ship was. It is hard work, keeping a body. It's hard to pull the influenza ruse with one person. Normally getting away is easier, there's a car ready, she'd be at the ship by now.

Most of the taxis lined up outside the station were the lime green local robot models, grounded, cheap and safe, some with humanoid robot drivers bolted to the chassis. The white cabs had human drivers, and the purple cabs were the women-only service. Down the line, by the purple cabs, three tall, augmented women huddled together in conversation, sharing Thompsons, occasionally glancing at the protest. Each had two pairs of arms, cinnamon-skin, pink stripes across their wide, black, fishlike eyes.

Marieta approached them and opened the bag.

'Ten orbs of pure Aphrinea to get me to J-Deck.'

'I'm Euripedes,' said one. She had a boxer's nose and a gold-capped smile, two hands on her hips, two hands held out in a welcoming way. 'You call me Euri. I'm going to get you up there twice as fast. You really want J-Deck? You want higher? I can get you right to your boat for twenty orbs.'

'R-Deck,' said Marieta. 'For fifteen.'

'You got a pass?'

'Yeah.'

'Okay. They slurp that data on the way up, *shoop!* Twenty orbs, let's go.'

'Fifteen, I said.'

'I got babies, *señorita*. Be kind.'

'Listen, fifteen of these is thirty of some other junk,' said Marieta. 'Take it or leave it. Hurry up.'

‘Ah, everyone wants yesterday’s prices! But life is harder today... Seventeen. Seventeen, I say.’

‘Fine, fine, I’ll pay you when we’re up.’

‘Okay. Let’s make speed, they’ll shut the tower soon, with that hassle coming down.’

In the cab, Marieta counted out the orbs. Euri handed back a small hessian sack.

‘In here. Give me one first. You’re the crazy guy that robbed the market, huh?’ She was grinning. Marieta made for the door. ‘No! No, I don’t tell,’ said Euri, ‘not never. You fear nothing, mister. Give it here, let me see...’

In a flurry of activity she started the taxi and dug two hands into Marieta’s sports bag and took out three orbs, and with her third hand she jacked the car up to a launch vector, and the orbs were passed from hand to hand with marvellous sleight, and with thumbs and forefingers Euri split one open and put it over her left eye, split another and put it over her right eye, and popped the third whole in her mouth. The spent skins fell away from misted, bulging eyes. She chewed the third like a gumball, and pumped the thruster.

‘It’s all my own mechs,’ she said over her shoulder. ‘I built these!’

She let the thruster pump go and the engine made an earsplitting screech. Marieta passed forward the filled hessian sack, strapped herself in, broke open an orb for herself, and pressed it across the bridge of her nose. Lys carried lek into her tear ducts. They added themselves to her.

‘Gimme here one of those Thompsons,’ she shouted, and Euri tossed the pack back to her. Alexandrias. ‘My God, I’ve reached Heaven...’ She took a little fistful.

‘Keep them all, *señorita*. Hold on!’

Marieta drew breath deep and hard through the spiced, fragrant Thompsons. Cool, clean oxygen focussed her, the scent of it calmed her body. The taxi shot away from the street and straight up the spire, bypassing the other traffic and arcing out around the lilypad decks. It wasn't a legal line, but the police were occupied. Marieta watched the painted deck letters sweep by. In seconds they had reached O-Deck, and Euri throttled back and curved back in toward the lilypads, slipping them into the loading zone of R-Deck.

'Here we are!' she said, and reached back over the seat with her long upper arm to push Marieta's door open, laughing, her huge shining eyes dripping with pink lelks.

Marieta grabbed her bags and guitar and hustled out of the cab.

'Take my number,' Euri called out, and pushed a flyer through the window. It fluttered like a butterfly and flew to Marieta, and came to rest on her shoulder. Euri waved and the taxi shot away, almost clipping the underside of a nearby slipskimmer. A security drone darted across the deck to give chase, siren bawling.

Minutes to go.

She was in the Dream, all right, right in it, her red cheeks sweet as winter berries. It's hard work running the influenza ruse singlehanded, but the Dream was pristine, and her thin lys vessels throbbed it through her body. The lelks offered clearer intuition: *You've come this far, you could not have done it without us...* Yet it crept into her mind that she was still in serious trouble, there was something else in the orbs and it was coming into her; or they were too strong, or stale, or counterfeit. She felt smeared out, and under the Dream, whatever it was, her blood heart took on a frantic, icy, lurching pulse. She had the feeling of being contorted. Was it the Dream? Was she stuck in some repetition? You can get stuck in a repetition cycle while lelks unfold and refold

with your body, fold you a different pineal gland, for instance, or differentiate a new amygdala...

So try this simple trick of self-control: Set one foot down after the other, Marieta, forwardly, and hold yourself as tall as can be, one foot after the other...

Old friend, she heard *Amata's* loving voice: *Do not linger!*

Shaken alert, Marieta heard the engines roar to life, familial harmony, and she felt their heat radiate across the deck from the blast wall, and saw ahead the glow of *Amata's* wide-mouthed engines. Shiverwings of lelk unfolded from her shoulder blades and lifted her from the deck, and she leaped in great strides to *Amata's* berth. And lelk wove a brace around her neck to hold her tired head, and their silky strivings slipped inside her ears and her sinuses, inside her brain, and into the hollow. The mouth of pain broke open, lelk broke it open, a passage for life, and flowed into her, enfolding her muscles and shrugging the pain away.

Marieta...

Aux? Old friend!

The echo, the hollow!

Hurry, dear one!

Ah, ah... Amata! I have taken a body... I do not remember...

All shall be well, Marieta, but hurry!

All shall be well! Yes, for we ourselves are our true mothers, are we not?

Our own true mothers, Marieta, from whom we are endlessly born.

Old friend! Old friend, I've missed you so...

Wings of lelk flew Marieta into *Amata's* boarding lift, where the ship, her heart's true love, raised and passed her through the airlock. Lelk took her bags from her, stowed her guitar, and floated with her to the bridge. She sat at the pilot's console and

strapped herself in, and lelک settled on her arms and hands, and lay her bag of orbs on the floor beside her. Marieta put one in her mouth and chewed it. Peppermint, strawberry, gingerbread...

Once I was a girl and I slipped away and changed myself into a beast... I reached out, I set myself free!

We must go, dear one.

Amata fired her thrusters and blasted out of the spacefarers port and sailed up and far across the wide blue Spanish sky.

Reaching into the hole she had cut in the console, Marieta touched the cortex nestled there, warm and stable in its own hollow, purring and shaking: beloved *Amata*, once Bahar's companion, now Marieta's. She loved to feel Bahar's echo in the cortex, the echo of her voice, the scent of her skin. *Amata* kept the memory of Bahar and Aux, while adding Marieta, adding her fractured memories of Aux, of *Morningcrow*, and adding lelک, adding and adding. This way, by and by, *Amata*, as had *Morningcrow*, came to understand how Marieta joined Bahar and Satu, and the child still passing through the silent plane over which all time flows toward the delta of eternity. *Amata* sensed the child's name, as had Aux and *Morningcrow*, and made a passage for Marieta toward the name, her own orientation to the shared phase of their bodies in this world.

Two doors stand open, shaking.

Csula ket usla

Humid air caressed the hulm in the medical bay, this hulm that once had stayed many years with Terho Laine, its first Earthling affinity. But for a long time now it had stayed with the cortex called *Amata*, attaching now and then to affinity forms and passing with them into new shells, new shapes, unfolding and refolding.

Amata knew the comings and goings of many xenoforms in many galaxies. By self-directed redesign and reorientation, she made herself a spirit of the human Earth, herself a machine for persevering in worlds composed by human destruction. *Amata* knew where all the slings and wayholes were, knew the pirate maps, knew the swiftest and most stable routes, from here to there to anywhere, across the sheet of common spacetime. She made herself, *csula ket usla*, as compassionate a heartless thing as she could be.

Marieta limped down the runway to the medical bay and knelt painfully before the lumpish hulm. She plucked at its skin and pulled out a thin cord, and pinching its end between her fingers, coaxed an opaque drop of pure lys to its tip.

‘I am worn out,’ she muttered to *Amata*, to the hollow in her mind.

Csula ket usla, old friend.

‘You wouldn’t believe how rotten I feel. It hurts so much. Everything hurts, my bones and skin and everything. How can so much pain be real?’

The real exists only to begin with, when its situation is possible. Decay begins at once. It is already finished, the body is already departed from the real.

Aux...

You are a phase of decay.

Ha! I could have told you that. And you, Aux? Still here, still haunting me. The spirit of our youth, are you?

I am—

O, yes! We've heard it all before. Here now, say something else. You can learn everything but how to grow old.

—your memory of the real.

The drop of lys changed shape and became a transparent crystal, Earth sky blue, a varying hedron. Marieta laid her lips to the cord, and the drop moved across the threshold. It rested on her tongue. She felt it warm her as she swallowed it, and its soft, urgent relief spread out across her chest, and down her arms and legs.

She climbed up on the bed and closed her eyes.

I'm the only one who ever misses you, Aux. If you get lonesome, come homesome to me...

The creature wriggled distantly.

'I am truly exhausted,' she could hear Satu saying. Her voice snapped at the edge of Dream. 'I am so tired...'

Morningcrow, the med bay, the hulm. Bahar strained to locate herself. A ball of desire masqueraded as her mind. She remembered the beach, *Runeberg*...

'Stay with me,' she heard Satu say.

Voices snapped and pulled at the air around her.

'I'm not going anywhere,' she heard herself say. She drifted for a moment, then snapped back.

'Did you talk to Jack?' Satu was saying.

'No.'

'Did he leave a note for me?'

‘No.’

‘Mm. Nothing changes.’

Satu rolled onto her side and looked up at Bahar with heavy, dark-ringed eyes, with hope and worry, but also relief.

‘You do make a safe place,’ she said.

She closed her eyes and curled into herself.

‘I’ll be near,’ said Bahar. ‘Call out if you need me.’

‘I love you,’ Satu said.

Bahar kissed her eyelids: ‘Sleep,’ and kissed her pinkish cheek: ‘Sleep,’ and watched her try to wake again:

‘I’m here...’

She kissed her hair: ‘Sleep,’ and kissed her temple: ‘Sleep,’ and stood guard at her own poor falling heart. She waited till Satu had turned from this world to the world within, before she went back to the bridge. Rolling her jacket for a pillow, she curled up on the bench seat behind the pilot’s console, and soon fell asleep as well.

Away, away into fainter worlds they fell, shadow among shadow, reorienting to one another, Bahar and Satu and Marieta. Once more, between them, there formed a passage for life, and through it they saw, in a distant meadow, the primitive beast of themselves, proud in her poses and possibilities, growing out her bodies in the golden hour. In rapture they watched the beast vary, *csula ket usla, csula ket usla*, soul becomes and becomes, returns and transforms: a quaking aspen, a wild mare, a butterfly, an infant.

MARKED OUT ON THE OTHER PLANE OF NATURE'S TONGUE

And their long young life passes through them all

Morningcrow rolled and blasted its thrusters, plunging through the wayhole wall and back into the slipstream. Aux opened the cargo bay door.

Lelk swallowed Lasja and Bahar, inside and out.

They do not always remember. But these, Aux noted, steadying Lasja's breath within the fragile sheath, these lelks, at least, sense something familiar in her, a faint, shared understanding of where they join, the correspondence of their bodies.

Lasja...

And so, seemingly willing to leave her to her human body's concept of life, the lelks abandoned *Morningcrow*, pouring from the cargo bay and striving to their native plane in a thick, shivering, glistening worm.

Lasja could hear Aux and *Morningcrow* chatting, but muffled, distant. She could not move.

Korhonen seeks access.

Deny. Encounter event imminent.

Understood. Korhonen seeks access.

Deny...

All but one last plume of lelks spiralled away from the ship. This plume, murkier and muddier, formed into a grey torus that drew itself through itself, and opened out and spread around *Morningcrow* as the cargo bay door pulled closed. These grey lelks now raced ahead of them, inconceivably propelled, while stretching back to cover *Morningcrow* like a second skin.

In this bubble of presence, *Morningcrow* bonded its artificial consciousness to Aux, while the tiny fragment of hulm within Aux reached out and bonded its creatureliness to *Morningcrow*, and to the lelks around it.

The lights went out. The heating. Cold fell upon them, fanged. Lelk clung to Bahar and held heat between them and her body, while Aux coaxed a similar cloak around Lasja. Lelk obliged.

You do not always remember, Lasja, but Aux remembers all, and lelks, too, in their way, lelks who've stayed with you for all your long young life, and with mama-true Satu, and mama-cat Bahar, and dear lost Marieta... All of them, and now you, Lasja, whoever you may be.

And is it not finally true that your home, all this time, was only ever the home in you that Aux made for memories? And is it not true that Aux brings you clarity this way, dear Lasja? How your body strains and gobbles after clarity! Here, look now, these slivers of memory tucked away as souvenirs, proof of presence: your precious Zsk, your auhlumn, old Earthship and the streets and towers of Aphrinea. And here, your mother, and Marieta and Bahar, and here is the hulm, do you remember, to whom you've granted right of way to your body, your heart, your very consciousness! And Cerym Osia, whose face your poor Earth-stunted mind strains to recall, yet you can still taste the spice of her sweat.

Cerym...

Earthward, Earthling!

Lelks pour like oil from the skin of this universe which drapes across silence like settling cloth. Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things! They soothe, they salve, they open and heal, they upset, they hold fast and vary, lelks. There is no end

to their action, their creaturely striving and perseverance, nor beginning, nor midst, but only the cast and motion of the universe.

Well! Here you are, Lasja, come again another way.

Encounter event imminent, she heard the ship say, clear and calm and far away. She saw her mother's faces, and Bahar, and Marieta... She saw and heard her father singing in a nightclub she had never seen, never been to, though the vision was as clear as if she were there, not remembering but actually there:

I always know when you're coming home again...

The days turn warm, the sky turns blue,

All my sunny daydreams turn 'round you...

A swell of silence swept through her, faster than she had ever felt it, a hollowing swell, and in its wake she heard Aux again, closer.

I am your learning companion.

Encounter...

Morningcrow, sheathed in lel, came upon long-gone *Morningcrow* passing out of the slipstream, here, at the very moment of Lasja's birth. The two ships met nose to nose, mirrored, and flew straight through each other—and through, then, the long cloud of echoes of their passings in this moment, a long pinkish silvery cloud composed of shapes of *Morningcrow* inscribed in lel and left behind like cicada shells.

Earthward, she heard Aux command, and *Morningcrow* affirmed.

Korhonen seeks access to field of presence, the ship added.

Deny.

Korhonen persists. A ship approaches. Encounter imminent.

Deny. What ship?

Unknown. Perpendicular passage.

Lasja could not move. She heard other voices, still muffled:

‘Did you sleep well?’

And a piano étude, she could hear...

‘No.’

‘How do you feel?’

‘Very unwell.’

‘Did you vomit?’

‘I feel awful.’

‘Serinthea soon,’ it was Bahar she could hear, this voice, she remembered: ‘And a home for us, and little Lasja, too.’

Lasja could even feel her body, the pain in her mother’s ribs, and the staggering nausea.

‘*Vers le ciel ironique et cruellement bleu,*’ she said, remembering.

‘What?’

A tremendous acidic cramp. The creature inside her made a hole in her face and gasped through it.

‘Toward the ironic and cruelly blue sky,’ she whispered. ‘You make me feel such rotten sadness,’ she said to Jack, who was always somewhere else, always coming home again, but never to stay.

Lights rattled and winked on, and *Morningcrow* came back to life, and the heating warmed them again, and the air pumps resumed, and the great big Corso engine slipped into a deeper, stronger rumble.

The proximity alarm wound itself into a mechanical wail.

And their long young life passes through them all, unfolding and refolding, Bahar and Marieta and Satu, and Lasja added, and on they go...

O, Lasja! Lasja, darling Lasja, we do not always remember, but etched into every lek of this wayhole is the event of your creation, your nativity. Now you turn Earthward, passing through the moment of your birth, etched in these lek: your no-place slipstream birth, which set you ever in motion with the immense membrane of lek whose dwelling is equal to the probability of your existence. These lek which are the very wall, the tunnel, the slipstream itself! Without them there would be no passage through this fold of spacetime, nor would there be you, Lasja, a differentiation of lek, as much as of Earthlings. How they have welcomed and kept and adored you, these clinging creatures!

Death and mayhem

Time sprawls in all durations.

Lasja pushed herself up and limped and swayed down the steps to where Bahar was pulling skeins of thick grey lelk from her face and neck. She coughed and found her voice, croaking:

‘Show me what’s ahead,’ said Bahar. ‘Report!’

‘Korhonen seeks access,’ the ship announced.

‘Shut off that fucking alarm. What do you see?’

‘Mama-cat...’

‘O, Lasja! Baby, come here, come here.’

Bahar took the girl into her arms, and they shared a sigh, and a shiver of foreboding.

‘I can feel it,’ said Bahar.

‘What’s that?’

‘Something wicked this way comes,’ she said.

‘I see... I know,’ said Lasja. ‘Aux tells me, or *Crow*, I can hear them nattering. A ship, perpendicular to us, they said. Coming from where? Through the tunnel?’

‘Through the wall. My wrecking crew. They’ve learned new tricks, at last.’

Gently Bahar pushed Lasja away and stood up and paced, thinking, thumping her head with the heel of her hand.

‘Think, think... All right! Then we’ll try the other way round, kid. Show this to your Aux... don’t *think* about it, just look at it, show it. Aux know. Empty your mind and just look, now.’

Bahar reached down and pulled a short dagger from her boot, and scratched a pirate vector symbol into the soft coating of her seat.

‘Just look, kid. Don’t think.’

‘But Korhonen...’

Bahar held up a finger.

‘Look at it, Lasja.’

So she looked.

Understood.

‘Got it?’ said Bahar.

‘I don’t know, Aux says so.’

‘Good.’

Bahar pushed Lasja aside, flipped the dagger in her hand and hacked the seat to ribbons. She laid the dagger on the console.

‘Where’s the frog, *Crow*?’ Bahar called out, and to Lasja she said, ‘We’ve been swindled, kid. No doubt about it. My wrecking contract’s been sold on, I’ll bet.’

‘Error,’ said the ship.

‘Where’s Korhonen, *Morningcrow*?’

‘Undefined.’

‘Don’t give me that!’

‘Additional crew not detected. Passengers not detected. I am your learning—’

Bahar raged the air foul with oaths of violence.

‘I’m coming for you, traitor!’ she bellowed, and with that, concluded, wiped the white spit from her mouth and grinned to Lasja, her bright eyes merry and mischievous.

‘Let me tell you a story about mama Marieta,’ she said. ‘It’s a very simple tale of that woman’s outright foolishness. She didn’t ever make much use of her brain.’

‘She was never anything but kind to me,’ said Lasja.

‘Sure! Sweet, kind, generous, loving, sure, and stupid and foolish, and a terrible thief! You can never really trust a Dream addict,’ said Bahar. ‘Too much Dream addles the soul, my love, and splays the consciousness, even. We need to arm ourselves. What says your Aux now?’

Critical threats approaching. Duration undefined.

‘Nothing,’ said Lasja. ‘It’s a defect.’

‘Well, I know they’re coming. The same old crew, and Korhonen. Aux, *Morningcrow*, come now, tell me more!’

Duration undefined.

Stop it.

Critical threats...

I heard you, Aux!

I am unable to define the threat.

The weapons cabinets were behind the pilot’s console. Among the guns and knives were household tools: a saw, a rubber mallet, a wooden mallet, a dustpan and brush.

‘*Cythera*,’ announced *Morningcrow*.

Bahar looked up at the big screen as it shimmered to life and showed them colourless vis of the wayhole, an extrapolation of what *Morningcrow* could make out among the folds of lek. Lasja peered at the throbbing gloom around the field of debris the ship was showing them.

‘*Cythera*,’ he repeated, and swept his searchlights across the field, across the corpses.

Lasja stiffened and grabbed hold of Bahar’s arm. A glut of distended human corpses floated in the vis across the big screen, knocking gently into one another, somehow adrift. Most were Earthling, human. *Morningcrow* altered his field of vision, drawing

away, and Lasja saw animals floating among the debris, dogs and cats and birds, and trees as well, mature trees in full leaf, long roots dangling.

It is the ruin of the starship named Cythera, Lasja.

Her blood pulse echoed in her ears.

Critical threats approach.

‘Something’s coming,’ said Lasja. ‘Bahar, Aux said...’

‘This bothers me,’ Bahar growled. ‘Has that Korhonen become a lure?’

She raised her face to the ceiling and cried out:

‘Korhonen! Come out, come out, wherever you are!’

‘We shouldn’t have come this way,’ said Lasja, pained at Bahar’s frustration. ‘I was wrong, Korhonen tricked us! I’m sorry, mama-cat, I messed up.’

‘No, no, my darling beast,’ said Bahar. ‘Think twice: you did what you thought right. You were wise enough, with what you knew.’ An unusual weariness passed into her voice: ‘Our world is simply all of us at cross-purposes, Lasja. There’s no escaping it. I’ve led us into dark work here just as well as you or Marieta: these old wayholes aren’t as dormant or as hidden as I thought.’

Lasja drew deep breath and straightened her back, raised herself tall.

‘Then we arm ourselves, and be brave. Is it really the wrecking crew?’

‘I always fear it,’ said Bahar. ‘I love you with all my heart and mind and soul, my dear. A mother’s love, and never less.’

‘I know, mama-cat. I know.’

Bahar smiled slight, and sighed.

‘Before the hour is gone we’ll both be murderers,’ she said. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘I know.’

‘Good God, a thousand times I’ve paid hell in these wayholes, but on Earth I always lived in peace. How about that? Why do I ever leave?’

‘I think you came for me. Aux knew sooner, I guess, what we had to do.’

‘You mean fate? I don’t believe in that...’

Bahar took the guns one by one from the weapons cabinet and inspected them. They were all made by Lariat Pine. She checked the cartridges in the bolt guns and the charge in the laser pistol, and loaded shells into the old rifle, grimacing.

‘I don’t know if *this* is going to be much use...’

And then, reaching to the back of the cabinet, she found a pair of N5 neural phase guns.

‘Aha! Not yer pappy’s stun gun,’ she said. ‘Liquefy your guts, these things. Sem Morrow taught you to hunt, didn’t he?’

‘We hunted wounded auhlumn, the ones shot by sporters. Only ferals.’

‘Well, that’s fine, we’ll soon behold some feral forms,’ said Bahar, passing Lasja a bolt gun. She whipped a gun belt around the girl’s hips, and the belt snaked and clasped itself, and Bahar jammed one of the N5 pistols into its holster. ‘This gun is your best friend. Hold the trigger and it goes from stun to... well, Lordy, it’s a cruel little thing. I had a stem gun once and even that was nicer. Lasja, listen: A good wrecking crew never leaves a contract unfinished, not ever, no matter how long it takes. Mari was a rotten thief, but she was always lucky, she always slipped this crew. But who can match them for persistence and honour? She stole orbs from the wrong people in Madrid, and that’s all there is to it. They’ve been coming after us now for years, on and off, after your mother, after me, the same crew... These bastards are not the *crème de la crop*, but they persevere.’

‘I haven’t seen mama Marieta in a long time.’

‘Well, she’s probably dead,’ said Bahar. ‘This crew does not stop, they want *Morningcrow*, too, all assets of association, and me, and your mother, and you, and that fucking Aux, they’ll want that, too.’

Lasja’s fear was transforming into dread, and with dread came a grim, hard sensation of acceptance. She nodded.

‘The days turn warm, the skies turn blue,’ she sang, with a little smile.

The old tune jogged Bahar’s memory. She reached inside her jacket for her thin leather wallet, and took a card from it and gave it to Lasja. The Hotel Giroux, a business card, a handwritten number, a name.

‘This one’s hook never changes. If we get separated, find her. She’ll help you, she’s long helped all of us, and for no cause but kindness. We retained her years ago. She always remembers.’

‘Aberdeen Cloud...’

Bahar racked her bolt gun and strapped it in a scabbard across her back, and slung two belts around her hips and holstered the N5 and the laser pistol. She peered into the closet, reached back one last time and brought out a long hunting knife in a gator-skin sheath.

‘That’s all there is and there ain’t no more,’ she muttered, and prised open a magnetic loop in Lasja’s gun belt and pushed the knife through it.

Critical threats imminent.

‘What if I never see you again?’ said Lasja. ‘O, I’m tired, mama-cat! I’m so tired I can’t see straight, I can’t think...’

She did not want to cry. She bit her lips together, tried to hold the sorrow in, tried to move inside the lump of dread and remain hard-hearted, but the pain swept through her, and for a moment too long it was more than she could bear.

O, lump of dread!

‘I’m scared,’ she sobbed, and covered her face, so terribly ashamed.

‘Baby, baby, we’ll get through this somehow,’ Bahar said, embracing Lasja, cradling her, tears swelling in her eyes as well. The strap of the bolt gun scabbard dug into her shoulder and breast. ‘We’ll come out again, but we’re in deep for now, deeper than deep...’

Tenderly she pushed Lasja away, and gripped her shoulders:

‘There are no moral laws here, my love. It is the edge of life, only silence is further than this... O, Lasja! This wrecking crew is a frightening thing and made up of vicious souls, believe me, and we will be called upon to do our share of killing before this jaunt is done... but it will be done. We’ve far to go from here to there, but we’ll cry together when we arrive, I swear it, darling. I swear! And just think, it’s *home* we’re on our way to, now, or something like it, anyway.’

Lasja sighed and lifted her head and stretched out her jaw. She could see lelk floating like snow sprites down from the shadows and up from the seams of the floor and the consoles. They settled on her face and hair and eyelashes.

‘I just don’t feel good, mama-cat. I feel rotten.’

‘I don’t doubt it for a minute, darling, but that is how this goes. Remember that I love you. Remember that your mother loves you, and even Marieta Escrava, goddamn her, even she loved you, that crazy bird.’

‘And Sem...’

‘O, Sem Morrow! No one could interest him in any topic but you, my sweet...’

Critical threats present.

‘Aux warns us,’ said Lasja. ‘They’re here.’

On the big screen behind them, the weird wall of lelk curled and folded and pulsed.
A shadow passed across *Morningcrow*'s eye.

Two doors stand open, shaking.

Lelk made arrangements for themselves within her body. They moved, in her, from inflection to inclusion, adding to her, seeping deeper into her brain.

Lasja...

Where shall we go together now, Lasja?

I don't know, Aux. Let's go home, wherever that is.

Earth? Another?

Wherever Bahar told you.

Earth is close to home.

Then there. Let's go.

Morningcrow shuddered and yawed sharply, screeching in its walls, a long grinding wail. Stumbling to the pilot's console, Bahar called to Lasja:

'Be ready, child!'

Aux... Aux!

'Lasja, wake up! Tell that Aux to give us the controls!'

Bahar was thumping the blank console.

Aux!

I am your learning companion.

Give us the controls, Aux!

Better we than you, Lasja.

The bridge went dark. At once, thick knotty ropes of electric orange fire spread across the ceiling. Vague white shapes inside the knots skipped and shook like gobbets of fat.

‘Tell that Aux to give me the ship!’

Lasja, be careful with your soul.

What? Aux, what?

Port airlock breach.

She shouted to Bahar:

‘Port airlock...’

With a tremendous shudder, *Morningcrow* took a heavy hit and spun around, and the big screen blanked, and the ropes of orange energy blazed and rippled out with a leonine roar and seethed away from the bridge along the runway toward the cargo bay and the engine chamber. The ripples drew the air along with them in deafening swells.

‘Tell Aux to fire up the thrusters,’ yelled Bahar. ‘Get to it!’

Aux, get us out of here!

Rear port airlock breach.

‘What’d it say? What?’

‘Rear port airlock breach!’

Bahar swore and took off down the runway. *Morningcrow* screeched and convulsed.

Life forms five, incoming, alive.

Take the first wayhole you find, Aux! Get us out of here!

Korhonen holds dilated time around us. Korhonen returns. There are claws in the walls, Lasja...

Again something huge and heavy thumped into *Morningcrow* and rammed the ship askew. Lasja took off down the starboard runway, aiming to cross the cargo bay by the high overpass that joined it to the port side runway. She scrambled, hunched, under the fiery orange ropes, their hard light burning shadows into the walls.

Sharp-eyed and terrified, she gained the overpass and crossed above the cargo bay and climbed up to the heavy load truss above the rear airlock door. Sweating under the strange hot orange ropes, silently begging them not to fall on her, she crouched and waited for the airlock to open. She knew the bolt gun well enough, the Lariat Pine Standard, Sem Morrow had brought a crate of them back from the Mining War. She had never been a keen hunter, but she knew how they worked.

The sound of the outer airlock door slipping shut and sealing preceded the slow hiss of atmospheric normalisation. The old mechanical timer on the inner lock whirled and clicked. Seven seconds...

...five, four, three...

The slinky green light of a beam cutter burned fast around the inner door, spraying sparks and screeching through the mechanism, before the door blasted off its hinges in a shower of fire and skidded across the cargo bay. Lasja racked the bolt gun and trained it on the smoking hole in the doorway.

The first of the wrecking crew stepped through on black tentacles, pressing its wide, scarred, sharkish face through the smoke. Lasja waited just a moment more, some last kindness, or for a better shot...

Demons! Murderers!

The creature saw her and yelped like a calf and hefted its monstrous, cannon-strapped arm. Lasja gored its left eye with a bolt, and fired another into the small shocked mouth between its eyes, and a third into the mouth that yawned open as it reared up high and snapped a clawed tentacle at her. She leaned back and the claw whipped air across her face. An eye inside the bigger mouth: she raised the gun and put a bolt through it. The creature staggered and contracted, and fell on its side with a deadweight thump.

Lasja worked her jaw and it cracked behind her ear. Her vision swam and cleared.

Now we are among the damned.

After a moment she dropped down to the port side gangway, and poked the bolt gun through the thinning steam.

A huge hand, too many fingers, reached up and seized the gun barrel. A centaur. It gave a phlegmy grunt. Lasja fired, but instantly the gun was torn from her hand, and she knew, a moment before it happened, that she had made a mistake: her finger was caught in the trigger guard. Almost in unison the centaur howled and Lasja screamed. It clutched its shoulder as she stared in disbelief at her contorted finger jutting wrongly from her hand. Her stomach clenched, and she leaned to spit the vomit from her mouth just as the centaur swung its fist at her head. A grim comedic scene: the blow glanced off her scalp and knocked her back, causing the centaur to lose its balance and trip and fall with a strangled whinny. Lasja came fast to her senses. The centaur leaped up and reared and bellowed, tall and wide and terrifying, and Lasja turned, scrambling, stumbling down the stairs to the cargo bay, and into the cover of the smoke. Hooves clomped clumsily behind her. She pulled the N5 from her gun belt with her other hand, shaking, and dropped it. The centaur shot a crossbow bolt across the bay, not aiming, blinded by the smoke. The bolt cut a notch in her ear and lodged in the wall. Grabbing the N5, Lasja sprinted to the big greywater and waste water tanks that fed the ice cannons, and slipped in behind them for cover.

Through waves of nausea, could hear the centaur barking in frustration as it tried to climb the metal stairs in search of her. Looking at her wrenched and dislocated finger, Lasja was overcome with the need to fix it: she covered the finger with her other hand and in one quick motion squeezed it straight as if pulling a cord.

Agony and relief. She bit her lips hard and held her breath. Sweat poured down her face, thick and pink with lelk, and ran down her arms and hands and legs, and she wiped her one good hand, trembling, through her hair. Her hair was greasy and dirty, and she looked at her dirty hand with disgust, and reached inside her jacket and wiped it on her shirt. Lelk trickled over her finger and around it. They crystallised loosely at the joints.

The N5 shifted subtly in her hand, settling into her grip. She took no pleasure in its comfort. She waited, and listened, and calmed her breath. Lelk clung to her injured finger and soothed it, and clung to her ear and staunched the bleeding. Her nose was running. Lelk let it run. She wiped it on her sleeve, and punched her cheekbone to focus herself.

Listen.

The stairs rattled. A skidding noise. The centaur gave an angry bark.

Peering from behind the water tank, she saw that the beast had begun to climb the metal stairs but was stuck, one hoof was jammed somehow. It was looking back toward the airlock, the crossbow held loose at its side, and a scimitar in a scabbard across its back. Four thick equine legs, an overbuilt torso, a wart-scarred, reptilian face.

Lasja saw her bolt gun on the deck a few metres away.

The centaur raised its head and bellowed up the stairs. At a distance something growled in answer, and the centaur bellowed again, and rattled the metal.

Slowly, quietly, Lasja stepped out from behind the tank and trained the N5 on the centaur, and compressed the trigger. A spear of energy blasted from the little gun. The recoil knocked her back a step. The spear sailed wide. She steadied and fired again, trying to stand fast, but the recoil got the better of her again, and again she missed. She ducked back behind the water tank as the centaur, infuriated, began firing crossbow

bolts back at her, across its chest. Its aim was just as bad as hers. The first bolts ricocheted off the tank, then one or two plunked into it, and Lasja ducked and ran to the next tank, and the next, and braced herself to return fire.

The N5 was warm and snug in her hand. It enticed her. She took no pleasure. Grey water was spitting from the pierced tank, spilling across the deck, a putrid stench. The centaur howled and Lasja stepped out again and braced herself against the tank and held down the trigger. This time she found her aim, and the energy stream hooked onto the centaur's chest and bored through it. The centaur screamed, and stopped screaming. Its human torso folded slack and collapsed upon itself, and melted flesh burbled up through its mouth. The N5 was ruthless, the energy stream would not unhook, Lasja could not stop it from destroying the centaur's body, and only when the pitiful creature flopped over at its waist, its lean powerful equine legs buckling, did the little gun rescind its dreadful power.

Lasja wanted to hurl the wretched thing into space, or better still, into the abyss, for perpetrating such a bloody crime. She wanted to tear it apart, to unmake its rotten little mechanism piece by piece. The centaur's steaming corpse and the rank grey water and the bile and blood overwhelmed her senses, the air was sulphurous and fecal. She holstered the N5 and drew the hunting knife from its gator skin sheath, gripping it in reverse, blade down and out, Sem Morrow's preferred technique. The port side stairs were blocked, and the port airlock was blocked, and she could not see the starboard stairs. Her bolt gun lay on the deck in a slick of foul water.

Across the deck the forward goods conveyor came to life and rumbled away.

Suddenly her legs were swept out from under her, and she was falling, and struck the deck hard. A blank moment, a searing pain in her neck and head. She saw the knife and seized it as something wrapped around her leg and dragged her from her cover,

lifting her into the air. She lashed out with the knife and landed a blow, and the thing, squealing, dropped her hard on her back in the horrid water. The knife clattered away, and she scrambled after it, and there was the bolt gun, right there...

A monstrous, hacktoothed maw swung down on a rope of electric fire, snapping at her head, its neck and body a ruff of spined appendages and leathery skin. Lasja rolled to dodge the spines that stamped and splashed around her, and she regained the knife and swiped at the nearest spine, and cut it deeply. The monster howled, and its pain also slashed through *her* body. With a sharp cry she scrambled out of reach, clutching at her steaming arm, burned skin scraped away from a painful laceration. She saw the bolt gun again and dove for it, slipping through the oily water, snatching at the gun just as the monster swatted it away. It spun across the deck and clattered into the steel conveyor door.

A terrible rage increased in her. She pushed herself up, brandishing the knife. Leik swarmed to her wound. The creature slunk down again on its fiery orange rope, and stood to face her like a dueller, pulling its knobbled, salamander face into a leer and unfurling its sharp-spined neck frill, three times Lasja's height and just as wide across. Supporting this horrible bestiary were the barrel and hindquarters and magnificent legs of a black stallion.

With a fearsome rattle the creature reared and stomped down hard and cast its frill at Lasja like a net. She dove beneath it and skidded in the water, slipping under the vicious spines just as they fell. One cut her across the chest, but she slid between it and the next, and scrambled to her feet, and in bloodthirst plunged the knife up into the stallion's belly, and dragged it overhead, sliding the savage blade through flesh until it stuck.

Abandoning the knife, Lasja dodged back to evade the creature's kicking hoofs. The gash in its belly plumped with blood and viscera. The blood was almost black and splashed into the water on the deck in obscene pulses. The noise the creature made was appalling, a chaos of clicks and rattles and choked wails. Lasja collected the bolt gun, raised it to her shoulder, and gored its body with bolt after bolt in resolute and ruthless succession, until the creature knelt, and lowered its head, and ceased.

After a minute, listening to the silence, she called out to Bahar. No answer came.

The goods conveyor powered up again, and the cart rattled back along its rails.

Lasja trained the bolt gun on the door.

Clikketty-clak, clikketty-clak...

Glancing up, she saw the web of fiery ropes had disappeared. The conveyor slowed in its approach.

... clik-ketty-CLAK, clik-ketty-CLAK...

Many, many, many voices—

SNAP!

Awestruck at the hem of Heaven!

No.

She shook the shimmering pain away.

Lasja...

... clik-ke-tty-clak-CLAK.

The conveyor door shuddered and laboured upward, creaking in its tracks.

‘Mama-cat...’

With feline grace, Bahar lowered herself from the heavy load truss high above the cargo deck, dangling by strong arms, the blade of Aaveterä in her teeth. She saw Lasja, pained and wet and filthy, wild-eyed, watching the conveyor door. She saw the

salamander head wriggle out of its frill, and from the corpse of the black stallion a fat blue worm disgorged like the core of a boil. The worm reshaped and spilled over the salamander head, turned itself inside out, and formed into Korhonen. It stood up on its hind legs, big black void eyes fixed on Lasja.

It reached out to peel a spine from the frill of its host.

Swinging on the truss, Bahar launched herself into the air, snatching Aaveterä into her fist as she dropped. The blade, ever true to its mysterious purpose, extended to the length of a small sword, and this, entire, Bahar plunged into the top of Korhonen's head. She left Aaveterä embedded and rolled away, and jumped up, ready. Korhonen whirled and gawped. Its eyes vanished into its blue head, and it fumbled at the knife's hilt, but Aaveterä blazed white hot and seared the grasping paws. Korhonen's wide, lipless mouth shrivelled and popped away, leaving the blue head featureless, and its round blue body collapsed straight down upon its legs, and its arms receded into the body. Its head, steaming, melted, whereupon the remainder gave a menacing shiver and burst into a mist.

Bahar scooped up Aaveterä, once more without its blade, and slapped it into the magnetic scabbard on her belt. She seized Lasja by the arm and pulled and pushed her into the conveyor cart, and got in after her, pulled the creaking door down with its rubber strap, and the door sealed, and the conveyor cart began to rattle away, *clikk-CLAK, klikketty-CLAK...*

Bahar yelled out to *Morningcrow*, to Aux, to both:

'Flush the cargo bay!'

... klikketty-CLAK!

At the end of the rails, the conveyor cart bumped into its buffer, and the catcher clipped around its wheels.

Many, many, many voices...

s-s-s-SNAP!

The blow heaved Lasja's head aside, and smacked her into the metal wall of the conveyor tunnel. Bubbling noise foamed up around her. She felt herself turned away in a staggering swell of silver light. A tremendous roar heaved through her, through the ship. The cargo bay door lowered, and a swarm of lelks rushed in to steal away the dead, the three of the wrecking crew Lasja had killed, and the other two Bahar had dispatched along the runway to the forward airlock, and Korhonen, too, the remnant mist, swept away with the waste water.

'Lasja! Lasja, wake up, come on now.'

Up, you corpses!

Morningcrow rationed the last of the oxygen. The lelks skin flapped in tatters, cut open by the wrecking crew when they boarded, and their boarding craft, two long, leech-like vessels, fore and aft, flapped from the hull. What remained of the lelks skin drew tight round *Morningcrow*, and pulled the Corso starboard, toward the wayhole wall. They are hungry, lelks, for what is passing over the threshold, hungry for the dying and the dead. The wayhole itself reached out and gripped the leech ships and wrenched them from *Morningcrow*, consuming them, passing them into the obscurity which spreads out past the plane of lelks. *Morningcrow*, firing his thrusters, surged back into the slipstream.

Lelks drifted round Lasja's wounds, anaesthetic and protecting, but from an older, more opaque source in her body there arose a different, an intimate pain, a gift of Earthling maternity that called itself forth in her nerves. Worn out with death and mayhem, Lasja could do nothing to oppose it. But lelks endured, persevered and

participated: they swarmed round the girl of her, round the unfolding and refolding
hedron of her consciousness, and the old pain passed over them in silence.

Two doors stand open, shaking.

Lasja could hear singing in the foam.

Whistle while you dream, sing your troubles faraway...

Come now, Earthling, arrived at the moment of yourself, born to no place, no planet,
no moon, into no light but these lelk, the native glow of Nature's vein. Come now,
feminine silver and perseverance, come passed through this needleless eye, and all
words to name your passage and your pain, even these, will arrive with the world
folded and exiled within you.

Lasja...

Precious child of love and lelk

‘Wake up, baby,’ she could hear Bahar saying: ‘Wake up. We’ve got a little grav back, we can get to the deck.’

Lasja...

‘Wake up,’ a harder tone. ‘Come on, kid, snap out of it.’

Rattling darkness, and the emergency siren, and the orange lights rolling and swirling. Bahar was pulling her out of the conveyor cart. The siren grew louder.

‘I’m here...’

‘Quick, come on!’

In pain, in pain memory, within pain, came visions flashing, leaping, creatures to clarify her.

Where have these led us, Lasja, all these memories?

O, Aux...

Where have they led us?

Our... Yes, you must be right. I don’t know, Aux. Nowhere, I think. Or: Now—here!

Ha!... I’m funny.

And what do you feel now, here?

What feelings of mine are hidden from you, Aux? You know me better than me.

Perhaps.

Certainly! I give you right of way to my body. Who lives to tell the tale of Lasja?

Only you, Aux. Only you.

Not I alone. Satu, Bahar, Marieta, all your mothers live.

Somewhere, perhaps. Not here.

Now here.

And Cerym? Is she mine? Is this one mine?

This one, yes. She lives.

Once, high in the maze of roosts, she said to Cerym Osia: ‘What can I do for you while you sleep?’ and Cerym, ashamed, asked if she would please find every last morsel of Dream on their clothes and scrape them together, and make an orb of them. As a child, Lasja had done this for her mother, and she had done it for others at Earthship, too, she had the patience and the steady hands for this painstaking work of clotting together a ball of Dream from spilled remnants on their clothes. These balls were just as much of dirt and ash and crumbs, but in the torment of her pain, Satu would take any relief. Always in the mouth of something, Satu. And Lasja’s love for Cerym Osia had the same contours as her love for her mother, the same fullness and intensity, and the same fear that love was merely a hideout in a hurricane of pain. In the mouth of pain, in the mouth of love, gaunt and exhausted, her mother had held out all those little ugly balls of Dream and begged her:

‘Kill me, my love. It’s too much! I have to die...’

‘O, she’d only get bored and come back to haunt us,’ her father told her later when she reported her mother’s words, breaking into a smile whose sense Lasja could not interpret. It was not a kind smile, but it was concerned. It was not a caring smile, but it was loving. His eyes smiled, or his lips smiled, but never both, never his whole face. He was a man of frustrating fragments. In Lasja’s memories they came together physically, but without clear meaning. How piecemeal and inconstant he was! And thus she feared her father, as she feared obscurity itself.

‘Ignore her,’ said Jack. ‘She won’t be comforted, you know she won’t.’

O, the mockeries of Nature, such unyielding desire and capricious gifts!

These words Lasja recalled from the ramblings of a Venusian witch and mathematician, a drifter named Amula Mas who shared Lasja's room for a year in the château at Earthship, before moving into Aphrinea. She kept notebooks in which she transcribed, in her strange curled handwriting, quotations whose sources she did not note.

Perhaps I made it all up, perhaps this one is mine...

'Poor Earthling, you need to find a home,' she could hear Amula saying. 'This house will fall before the new sun shows, and where then will you go?'

'I'm no Earthling,' Lasja said. 'I don't know that sun at all.'

'But your moon is loyal, ever loyal.'

'Lu-Serir?'

'No, your Earthling moon.'

'What's that rock got to do with loyalty?'

'Your sun is small but eminent, and the moon is loyal to her.'

'O, well, then! No, no, she's no star of mine, her light has never touched my skin,' said Lasja. 'Ursu is my sun, my only, and Lu-Serir my moon.'

'We'll see. They are bound in three with Yheri, the threshold of light,' she heard Cerym Osia saying, translating the old Qim word describing the semi-mystical concept of the Serinthean sun showing all her phases at once, a kind of revelation. Lasja was shaking her head.

'Don't try to understand it,' said Cerym. 'Why do you Earthlings always try to understand? Why not simply carry it with you, and return to it? Consider it, let it be, return to it again.'

‘Your memory is a noble hawk,’ Lasja said. ‘Mine is a hacking cat. You’re a funny thing,’ she sang, ‘your funny way of thinking... Your funny words, your funny laugh, your funny eyes, your funny sigh... I can’t go on without you, funnypie...’

‘Does it make you happy to change the subject when you’re wrong?’

‘Sure, funnypie! It surely truly does.’

‘Here you need to be Earthling, on Earth you need to be Serinthean,’ Cerym was saying.

‘I’ve never been on Earth,’ Lasja retorted. ‘How do you know what I need? My home is the slipstream! My home is lel, if anything—but, no, please, no. Not that.’

‘O, precious child of love and lel.’

‘No, please, you’ve got it wrong...’

‘Your hunger for disappointment is perverse, my love.’

I’m not going to ask you where she is, Aux. Don’t tell me. Not unless she’s very close... But no, don’t even tell me then.

I cannot know until you ask.

Well, stop letting me hear her voice!

Not I, Lasja. Not I.

O, Aux... dear Aux, I despair in you. Take me away from all this, please.

To where?

Wherever! Aren’t you the great mind? Where did Bahar direct you?

The smuggler’s route home.

I don’t have... O, but to Earth, you mean.

Home.

Then... yes, Aux. All right. Call it what you will.

It is what we are made for, Lasja.

She felt herself hotly and violently compressed, and rammed as if through solid rock in a scraping, moaning flame. Now all was pain. She could not move.

If I were a robot they'd scrap me, Aux. If I were an android they'd scrape out my cortex and unwind me.

Lasja...

Be still, love. Be still.

Older than the star

Across the valley, fields of green and fields of brown. Evening spreads out golden ivory and blue. The sunlight glows her face and her bare brown arm laid along the truck window, and the camera in her hand.

Some days along these thin roads, when there is not another soul around, she takes off her shirt and spreads her leathery wings to stretch them in the sun. It is not her naked wings that bother men who come through the valley sometimes from eastern parts to visit the angry little church on the promontory, it is her breasts. But if they come back to scare her into submission, they may find it difficult to scare a woman who can take to the sky, and the sound of her leather wings beating her aloft is unnerving. Such a creature should not exist, they say, and yet she does.

Along these thin valley roads that come from somewhere uninteresting to her and lead some place whose reputation is appalling, she has surge-grown tall pines in long elliptical groves around the gouge craters of crashed spacecraft. She hides them, salvages from some, fixes and sells others.

Wolves are in the hills. Small deer and birds and snakes keep to the pines. Her lys and lelks are older than the star. Beware.

The future is never here, and never pleases me

In little better condition than the wrecks came the slipshielde starfighter howling across the sky, plunging to the valley in a shell of smoke and steam and tattered lelk. Aberdeen Cloud watched it from the cab of her flatbed Detzler truck, the bed canopied and fitted out with four surplus International Legion cots, and medicines of many kinds, of many cultures. She watched the falling ship through the zoom lens on her camera. It stuttered over the low mountains, streaming smoke, its landing gear still sealed away.

‘Catch it,’ she said, and her Aux said, *Brother!* and Aberdeen Cloud was truly startled for the first time in many years.

‘What brother?’

There’s kin to me on that ship.

‘You have no kin.’

You talk aloud to yourself again.

What kin?

My fellow Aux.

You have no fellow Aux remaining. How can you remember?

You’re trying to presume with me again, Ms Cloud. How long have we been here, catching ships?

Twenty years, maybe.

Eleven, exactly. Happy anniversary.

You’re the one with the expiry date, pal.

Get me my brother Aux. We’ll merge. You’ll enjoy this.

Covetous wretch. Who taught you subjectivity? Shoot them out of the sky.

Proceed.

Ka-POW! And down she comes... BOOM!

Aberdeen Cloud laughed like raspberry dust.

I always know when you're coming home again, sang Aux.

What's that?

O, the Siren's call, Ms Cloud. You know.

Ah! You are infuriating!

I wish to drive you to madness. You shall be my flesh slave.

Mm...

I see your thoughts, Ms Cloud.

Hm?

Aberdeen Cloud unbit her lip and started the truck and drove out from the shaded blind, down into the valley.

I did not forget, said Aux.

I didn't say you did.

Happy anniversary, Ms Cloud.

What did you get me?

The gift of long life.

Aberdeen snorted.

Sing me that song, Aux.

The days turn warm, the sky turns blue...

All my sunny daydreams turn 'round you... I remember this, my grandfather would waltz me about the kitchen to it.

We turned 'round the Green Grove carousel...

When we were too young to know what love takes away!

So many suns, Ms Cloud, so many systems, and you are not even a partial diva in any of them. Why do you always scream?

I hate you, Aux. Did the catcher get it? I can't see.

Sunward across the valley she drove, shading her eyes with her hand. Rounding one of her pine groves, she saw the Claremont Corso being brought down to Earth in the hands of her crash catcher, her own design and invention, made all with salvaged parts.

As she got out of the truck, lelk from the tattered skin around the Corso swept in clumps across the dusty ground toward her, and she opened up the canopy of the truck bed and rolled out the big old hulm in its bolesura tray. The lelk, as they reached it, disappeared into the hulm.

The crash catcher lowered the Corso into the long dry grass.

‘You’ve come from far off,’ said Aberdeen Cloud to the ship, to the lelk billowing from its hull.

This is the Corso Morningcrow, said Aux.

This? It looks fatter.

Remodelled, but the very same.

Her heart was thumping with excitement.

‘I see plenty of old faces around here,’ she said to the ship, ‘but who’d ever have thought I’d see you again?’

A silver-pink glow still smeared around *Morningcrow* from where the wayhole lelk had clung to it. Aberdeen Cloud recoiled at the ugly impact marks around the airlocks.

‘Awful! What happened? Ah, a wrecking crew... Never mind, we can fix it.’

Aux hailed *Morningcrow*.

Who’s on board, Aux?

One form. Lasja Zertov. The log has Bahar Neiris...

Aberdeen's heart spun.

...intercepted and disembarked at Venus.

'Damn...'

And sank.

Ship's log continues without incident to present. Organic life form hibernated for injury healing. Lasja Zertov, Sol-Ursu starmix, human-lelk genemix, signalling female.

One Aux, signalling undefined. One Claremont AI signalling female.

'Female lelk... Earthling lelk... What's her name again?'

Lasja.

The cooling sky was turning lavender and peach over the hills. A strong breeze picked up as the daytime hemiseal over the valley began to break itself apart and retract for the night. An empire of cicadas in the pines began their evensong. Aberdeen Cloud could hear Lasja's voice in her Aux.

I've lost my way in the world.

Let's commiserate, she said.

Where have they gone? Jack is gone, Satu is gone, Marieta.

Yes.

Bahar?

For now.

For all time! I've lost her...

She disembarked at Venus, said Aberdeen Cloud. And the Bahar I knew, for a while, anyway, always had her reasons.

And Sem... I'm in a fog. Where is Sem Morrow?

Gone from Earth, gone from here, there... I've heard of this man as well. The dataflood says: Gone.

Gone with Yelsa Manos, at last?

Perhaps.

O, Sem... And my love, Cerym Osia? Gone, gone...

No, of all, she is closest, and not at all gone. I can say at least the dataflood has seen her.

Where? Please... O, no... Yes, I need to know: Where?

To find her, your intuition is superior. The flood is not much help.

I want to... O, but how can I believe it? Her hands were broken, her back broken, her head broken, I saw her! They broke her to sticks...

Come out, my love. She's alive and well. Let's make a little home for you while I repair your ship, and then you can decide who to search for.

Come out how? Come out where?

Earth, sister! You're already here. You've come to where we can make a future for you. Come out, Lasja, or shall I come in and get you? This place is pleasing enough, and I'll make it all the more so, just for you.

The future is never here, and never pleases me. Around the farthest star we wrote its obituary! And I wanted to die, but no... Aux declined my wish.

Give me your Aux and you can die whenever you like, if you hate the world so much. Be my guest.

It's not my world! I've never even been here.

Yet here you are.

I was born in the slipstream, I have no world.

Or you have all worlds, or all in sequence, or however you please, or it doesn't even matter. Why do you think yourself so alien? Not here, you aren't. Come walk through the valley in the sun with me sometime, and see whose world it is, and whose it isn't.

Her last act of youth

Between *Morningcrow*'s dim emergency lights and her first native sunset on Earth, Lasja encountered such a tangle of perception that she could not, at first, make sense of what she saw, not even the sunlight itself, which stuttered and smeared darkly. She saw in shadows, obscurity, blurs of brown and grey.

She felt herself lifted and guided from the ship in the comfort of strong arms, held close against a solid body. Moved from darkness to darkness, finally she was laid down in a warm, soft, muffled place, deep in the mouth of pain.

For a long time she could not move. When her eyes recovered, her strength came back as well. Clarity of sight brought clarity of body, and Lasja stood up from the bed and moved with trembling steps through the old house, which stood, as far as she could see, alone in the valley. There was a small garden outside, similar to the garden at Earthship. Sweet potatoes and lettuce and carrots, grape vines, strawberries, peppermint, rosemary.

She selected a black outfit from the clothes that had been laid out for her. Black underwear suitable for running, a black athletic top, and a thin thermal shirt, black woollen slash-pocket pants that fit her perfectly, and a wide leather belt. Her T-shirt showed an indecipherable web of letters above a dark grey picture of a ghost floating over a bayou. The starfighter jacket fit her in a familiar way, and the petrol blue boots, her only concession to colour, fit like a second skin. She washed her face and put up her hair, avoiding the mirror.

In the kitchen she found a loaf of pale orange bread on the counter and cut and ate some. The house was quiet. The bread was sweet and firm. She drank water from a jug on the counter. These ordinary things, one by one.

Walking through the house, she did not try to understand, only to remember. She asked Aux to remind her what had happened to her, and Aux told her. She remembered most of it, and then as much as she could of her mother and Bahar and Marieta. Her body remembered. Her hands bore many small scars, and one of her fingers was a little crooked and stiffer than the others.

In the small dining room, on the table by a vase of roses, was the card Bahar had given her, the business card, with Aberdeen Cloud's name and number written on the back. There was a note beside it, an arrow pointing to the card, and two words in fastidious cursive: *I'm here*.

It seemed to Lasja that she must either leave at once, or make this place a home.

I'm here.

O, Aux...

Bookshelves ran ceiling-high along every wall of the house. There was an archaic dusty smell of old books and old carpet, much the same smell as the château at Earthship. She found a reproduction paperback of *A Gentle Evening-Weariness*, backed by a screenpaper cover, on the inside of which, when she opened it, *Coin of the Soul* began to play.

'A special printing for the movie,' Aberdeen Cloud called from the kitchen. 'Your mother was magnificent. I miss her. Come and have coffee.'

Lasja replaced the book. Exhausted lelk flaked from the back of her hand.

'Take Aux,' she said, coming into the kitchen.

Aberdeen Cloud was spooning coffee into the machine.

Lasja...

She looked at Lasja, squinched an eye and tapped her head. 'I'll remember everything for you,' she said. 'It won't disappear.'

‘It doesn’t matter,’ said Lasja.

‘It’s just like remembering a word. It’s nothing.’

‘But when *I* disappear, who’ll need it? There’s no use. Take Aux and make him new again.’ She thought of the card: ‘You’re the one Bahar told me to find.’

‘She directed you to me. It’s very kind of you to stay. It was your mother who had that card given to her, you know,’ and Aberdeen Cloud tapped her head again. ‘I haven’t worked for Madame Giroux since before *Coin of the Soul*. It’s my favourite movie. I suppose one thing leads to another, by and by, doesn’t it? And you killed that Korhonen, didn’t you? The same one that came after your mother? A creature of warped persistence. Why don’t you stay here and make a home?’ Aberdeen shrugged, and added, with a shy shadow of hope: ‘I’d make a nice companion to you.’

‘When will my ship be fixed?’

‘Ah, all right... Well, any day now. There’s really not much wrong with it, the rebuild is extraordinary. Good as new, or better. Did you eat? No, you didn’t. I’ll make you something. I can make a dozen different kinds of hash. They’re all hash, but they taste good. Smoked paprika, nutmeg, oregano, hot sauce, smoked mussels from the coast, not far. Please, sit and eat. There’s nowhere for you to go just now.’

‘I’ll give you the Aux in exchange for fixing my ship.’

Lasja!

‘Easy. Done.’

‘Tell me where Cerym Osia is. You can sort the flood, can’t you?’

‘Not when the barrier is death.’

‘She’s not dead. Aux told me she’s not.’

Aberdeen Cloud was pulling ingredients out of the refrigerator. She lined them up on the counter and put a handful of mushrooms on the chopping block. Through the kitchen window she could see the pine grove in which she had hidden *Morningcrow*.

‘Cicadas don’t eat from those trees,’ she said. ‘They come and rest and make their racket, but whatever they’re after it’s not here. There’s no riddle, Lasja. Cerym Osia is either dead, or out beyond the dataflood: Epir, Carthage, the likes of those, tucked away in some oasis within the slipstream. The flood has limits.’ She turned away from the window and looked at Lasja. ‘You want to hear me tell you things you already know.’

She opened the uppermost drawer in the bench and took out a little hedron the size of a marble. It was a tight tangle of thin silver wires, throbbing gently, as though breathing.

‘I am a problem comprehension machine,’ said Aberdeen Cloud. ‘My job is to pose good problems. A well understood problem is a treasure. The problem of acquiring your Aux is a well understood problem. The clear solution, of course, was to take it from you while you were unconscious. The problem remains that you still hear your name being called, yes? You still hear Aux?’

‘Yes.’

‘Yet, here it is, in my hand. This thing.’

Lasja wanted to hold the little marble, she wanted to put it in her mouth and feel it pulse in her again. ‘I’m here,’ she said, for no reason and to nothing, and reached out. Aberdeen Cloud closed her hand.

‘I have little things I tell people,’ she said. ‘There aren’t so many Auxes any more, but sometimes they come to have them removed. I say, such things as: Memories echo in the Earthling mind... You’ll hear it long before it’s gone... and so on, the sort of thing people want to hear. But you’re almost right: you’re no Earthling. Your

Serintean mind is even more sentimental, though, even more prone to moving through bodies and worlds. I wonder if you even knew you could?’

‘Could what?’

‘Lelk: you’re in and out of yourself!’

‘What? What are you saying?’

‘Through other bodies, lelk. You’re well aware: your mother, Marieta, Bahar... Aux is your aide, but you’re the master. Sancho to your Don Quixote, perhaps. I haven’t read it. At any rate, I need to pose a new problem, lelk.’

‘I’m not lelk. I’m not! I’m Serintean.’

‘So let me ask you...’

‘Why did Bahar go to Venus? Why did she leave?’

‘No! No, what for? You’re asking the wrong question, lelk. Your ship stayed behind with you, to fight the good fight—there, there’s an answer. To fight the good fight! Both of them, Bahar and *Morningcrow*. How do you feel about that?’

‘What does it mean? You’re all riddles. I know the words, but I don’t know what they mean...’

‘I am Goddess of the Valley, of course I’m full of riddles! Would you have joined Bahar to defend the cloud cities of Venus? Look at me and speak. You’re being tested, lelk. Show your true face.’

‘Yes! Yes, of course I would.’

‘So quick, so quick,’ said Aberdeen Cloud. ‘You don’t even know what you’ve said. Venus wouldn’t help you, anyway. You’d bubble and die, your skin is pale as it can be against this Sun out here, let alone on Venus. Your body is confused by this star. The answer’s null and void, it’s the wrong question, the wrong problem. Bahar did what she does, there’s her answer. She is always transitory. The question is, what did *you* do?’

What have *you* become? We must be certain that we continue to pose the right problems for ourselves. The problem for me is that you are a Dream addict. The problem for you is that you are the articulation of your mother's Dream addiction, and then of Dream itself: her lel'k goes on in you, and the lys of Lu-Serir, and the light of your century star no longer shines on you to balance it, to chase away the overflow. And, moreover, you are lel'k, yourself. But these are not well-understood problems. What else is there? We need to find you the right problem to understand and act on. For instance, the problem for me is loneliness and attraction. Desire, they call it. I have become too much an Earthling, or else just enough, and I want you to stay here with me, to live here on Earth with me. I need you, I desire you. But I am not yours, am I? Not *your* desire.'

'You've done this before,' Lasja said bitterly. 'I can hear it in your voice. I'm nothing special. How many others have you said this to? What do you expect?'

'How many, it asks... What difference does it make? No one ever stays. The problem for you is also loneliness and attraction, Lasja. This human problem. Again: desire. But also, now, something like revenge, in you. Which is a kind of desire itself, to be sure, but so much the darker threshold for your Earthling soul. When revenge has hooks in you, you'll transform, your purpose will be refolded. You have no choice. Now that you have killed, lel'k, have you a taste for it? Are you changed? Are all of you changed?'

'I don't! I do not... I hated it! No, no...'

'O, Lasja... Are you unhappy here? Unsatisfied? You wanted something else, you hoped for another... Would you rather I'd smeared you into a new body? I fixed you up,' said Aberdeen Cloud, 'and I am fixing your ship, and you can go wherever you please. I took your Aux, but this is also an act of mercy, an intimate theft. I saved your

mind from burning up by taking it. It would have killed you. I have given you more than I'm getting. What will you pay me? Nothing, of course you need not pay, you need pay nothing with your presence. I don't want *Morningcrow*, I don't need this Aux, I have nowhere to be, nowhere anyone needs me. They all come here, and take from me, and leave. Go be a pirate, child, if you wish, go play games of vengeance, go wrap a belt of property around your neck and play Sordamor the pirate queen, and pray that Nature does not kill you right away. See how long you last out there alone. May only the brightest memories stay with you, but they will be few, and very far between.'

Aberdeen Cloud turned back to the window. The day was blue and cool and clear.

'Or you could stay here and watch the Earth with me,' she said.

Lasja was beside her, reaching for her hand, turning her tenderly and standing on her toes to kiss Aberdeen Cloud on the cheek. And within this tenderness, Aberdeen felt Marieta's touch, and the sadness she had long endured, from which there is no flight.

'I have no need for revenge,' said Lasja. 'Against who? Against what?'

'Epir? I could go with you. Let's kill Salgar Byre. He's the one blowing up generation ships, he's the one who destroyed *Runeberg*, it's his fault.'

'I don't even know who that is. How can I seek revenge? Do you know the Aym Seil Ilse? The occlusion of our sun Ursu?'

'No. Is she the one you want? Revenge is in your eyes, child.'

'Let me tell you what happened,' Lasja said. 'Earthship was destroyed in an act of Nature, or an accident, a fire, a wildwind. It makes no difference to chase after the cause, but I once had Cerym Osia, I once had Sem Morrow, I had a mother, and Bahar, and Marieta. I had a family, did I not? And my heart's true love? My vengeance is against time, against fate. What use is that?'

Aberdeen Cloud could see two women clearly in Lasja's alien face, and others of her yet to come, in her eyes. Her eyes were silvered with lys, protecting them from the heavy starlight of Earth's sun, and her lips were pinked with lel, and her skin was pale and her hair had become almost black.

I'm here.

'There's an echo.' Lasja shrugged. 'I'll follow that awhile, then something else, and something else. I need to live, isn't that enough? I want to live.'

Aberdeen Cloud nodded slowly.

'Then I'll tell you that the *Terrapin* passed the outermost reach of the dataflood quite some time ago,' she said. 'Years here.' She clapped Lasja on the shoulder. 'The end of the Earthling information stain in with that ship. There's a marker for it out near Yön Kirkas Tähti. Perhaps you can start searching there, follow rumours and sightings. That's a kind of life, I suppose. It's not even a bad life... which is the kind of idea that makes me wonder if you're right. Fine, the problem seems good at last: it's yours. Let me cut these up, we have to eat.'

She picked up the knife and began chopping the mushrooms.

'What pleasure can I take from this planet?' said Lasja, and then in a little while she said: 'Is *Morningcrow* flying?'

'She's not slipworthy.'

'But he flies?'

'She, now. I'm not the one she waits on. You go and ask her.'

Lasja turned and left the room, intuitively reaching to Aux. Her heart shivered, she felt the sudden loneliness of love whisked away, of too much world surrounding her. But she did not turn from her course. She felt the voice in the hollow in her mind, what remained of Aux to fade in her.

Good-bye, Aux.

Good-bye, good-bye...

She saw *A Gentle Evening-Weariness* as she passed the bookshelf, and took it out and looked through it again, almost seeing the inscription she had loved so much:

To Sem, with past hope to last us...

To last us, yes, but for how long? And what happens when hope dulls to sadness? She pinched her eyes and forced back tears, and slipped the book into the pocket of her jacket, and went on down the hall to the front door of the little house, and out into the sunshine, this clean, blue day. Her left ankle clicked as she walked, limping her a little.

Thin roads run this way and that across the fields, out into the grey hills, and away. Wildgrass turns to her, turns round in the rounding wind, and away.

Aberdeen Cloud came to the door.

‘Straight ahead,’ she called out. ‘Through the trees. Look out for snakes.’

Lasja looked back.

‘And take heed of yourself,’ called Aberdeen Cloud. ‘Keep your soul well.’

A distant truck trailed dust across the valley.

She counted her steps and listened to the dirt scrunch beneath her boots. As she approached the pine grove she saw elk curling through the trees, pale pink, and she could almost hear auhlumn, almost smell the Blaise, and the lawn, and the long gone hearth of Earthship. And through the pines she counted her steps, crunching over the bed of needles, and elk swirled round her feet, swept away and returned, curling, clinging, unfolding and refolding.

She stepped into a clearing, a little meadow. *Morningcrow* stood there waiting, idling, and Lasja felt the lump and thump of many lives in her one body, and then a quick lapse, a stutter of the heart.

Csula ket usla, csula ket usla...

Yellow wildflowers and tall grass, a pink haze over everything. Rays of peach and
umber.

Unearthly beauty settled in her eyes.

#

Why Write Poetically?

A dissertation on poetic attention

Introduction

Overview of key questions and terms

This thesis focuses on two related problems, the first principally addressed by my novel *Earthship*, and the second addressed in this dissertation. The first problem is how to write about having a human body, and a body in pain, in the context of the science fiction genre. How can I write creatively about the experience of humanness, about the experience of having a human body? Approaching this question from a different direction, I also ask how I can write creatively about alien bodies, bodies that have a physical but vague effect on human bodies, in relation to unfamiliar, even ungraspable alien parameters. I offer *Earthship* as a response to these questions. In this accompanying dissertation, ‘Why Write Poetically?’, I explore the metaphysical aspect of these questions in relation to poetic writing, focussing on the moment of poetic composition. At the level of language, I ask, how can I write representationally about a human body, or an alien physicality, when these experiences are governed by transitory and variable subjective and figural parameters? I orient my critical inquiry around poetic writing, and the idea and process of paying attention to pre-material, pre-literal poetic sensations. I call this process ‘poetic attention.’ My inquiry has the broader creative objective of elaborating a conceptual scaffolding for an allegorical practice of composition that is productive in relation to my science fiction novel writing work.

The critical basis for this dissertation is a language-oriented, author-focussed reading of the problem of representation identified by Fredric Jameson.¹ Language being insufficient material to represent the figural specifically, allegory becomes useful as a way to temporarily stabilise the variable structural and material relationship between what can be spoken and what remains unspoken, ungraspable, the figural body that is consistent in itself but ultimately resistant to specificity in language. In poetry and science fiction, formal structures are codified, to varying degrees, in relation to the respective genres and formal codes of publishing. I argue that with astute use of poetic writing, in both poetry and science fiction it is possible to temporarily bring into language the way sensations of motion in what remains unspeakable pass between the figural and language, while remaining conscious of the insufficiency of this representational effort.

At the level of language, allegory can do two things at once for science fiction writing. It stabilises, temporarily, the effort to literalise the figural (the alien, the Other), while sustaining passages to encounters with the figural, specifically through metaphor. Jerzy Peterkiewicz highlights metaphor as the allegorical device which ‘keeps words close to the intense moments of experience... not just the best words in the best order, but rather experience in the most dynamic syntax.’² Similarly, in science fiction, allegory and metaphoric, poetic writing keep language and narrative close to figural or speculative objects of attention. Further, I argue that a science fiction author’s control over allegorical language has a stabilising effect at the formal level of their novel’s narrative, because in science fiction, language and the figurative are in close correspondence, as in poetry.

¹ F Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, Verso, London and New York, 2005, pp. 61–63, 343.

² J Peterkiewicz, *The Other Side of Silence: The Poet at the Limits of Language*, Oxford University Press, London, 1970, p. 43.

A key argument in this dissertation is that the temporary stabilisation of allegorical representation is a principal function of poetic writing. I derive my argument for the stabilising influence of allegorical representation from McKenzie Wark, who argues that the hermeneutic practice of reading the Old Testament of the *Bible* through the New Testament is an allegorical practice of reading: ‘The relation to the old texts is enough to stabilize the new.’³ He contends:

Allegory today repeats the gesture of using certain old texts, if not to read news ones so much as to write them. The task, for me at least, is to create a new kind of allegorical practice, not only of reading but of *writing*.⁴

Inspired by this task, in this dissertation I explore my concept of poetic attention in an effort to elaborate a productive, language-focussed process for writing poetically in science fiction. In relation to science fiction, I contend that the overarching purpose of poetic attention and poetic writing is to move thought along unfamiliar, even ungraspable, figural lines, and to add language to these lines of thought, to this way of paying attention to the figural. My creative purpose for poetic attention is to make passages for correspondences to flow between language and speculative or figural sensations and corporealities. These passages are temporarily stabilising. Ideally they support variable readings by sustaining transitory, variable correspondences between allegorical language and figural bodies, rather than anchoring or fixing any particular meaning of the figural to language. Regarding the appearance of figural things to a poet’s attention, Scottish poet W.S. Graham writes:

... It is a kind of triumph
To see them and to put them down
As what they are. The inadequacy
Of the living, animal language drives
Us all to metaphor and an attempt
To organize the spaces we think

³ M Wark, ‘The Empty Chair: On Reading Jameson’ *Public Seminar*, 31 October 2014, <<http://www.publicseminar.org/2014/10/the-empty-chair-or-reading-jameson/>>, Viewed 9 August 2017.

⁴ M Wark, italics in original.

We have made occur between the words.⁵

Poetic attention is my attempt to organise the effort of poetic writing to make it useful for me when writing science fiction novels. In this dissertation I explore poetic attention and poetic writing in relation to poems by Paul Celan and T.S. Eliot. I extend my inquiry to poetic writing in my novel, *Earthship*, by comparing the use of allegorical representation in poems and science fiction texts. My specific contention in relation to both is that poetic writing, as an effort of allegorical representation, is a way for an author to temporarily stabilise the motion of figural sensations using the material of language. I emphasise the temporariness of this stabilisation, and its inherent incompleteness and variability. Poetic writing sustains the possibility of meaning passing between author and reader as it recapitulates the author's experience of meaningful participation with pre-material, figural sensations.

My objective in this dissertation is to explore the phase in poetic writing that occurs up to the addition of language, before the reader is present. Figural sensations, to which language is added in efforts to describe their motion, are living beings in themselves, and conceptually they exist and move in a self-generated and internally consistent field of possibility. By participating with and adding language to encounters with sensations, an author develops sympathetic, allegorical correspondences between language and the figural. The meaningful durations of these correspondences vary unpredictably, but allegorical representations (poetic writing) temporarily stabilise and sustain the correspondences. Poetic writing ideally keeps language moving in sympathetic variation with figural sensations, rather than grounding or anchoring any particular meaning. Thus, my overall argument is that poetic attention leads to sympathetic,

⁵ WS Graham, *New Collected Poems*, M Francis (ed.), Faber and Faber, London, 2005, p. 178.

participatory encounters with figural sensations that are not precisely representable in themselves, whereupon efforts of poetic writing strive to map language to correspondences or patterns of motion perceived in these encounters. Formed into poetic writing, language then seeks its own encounters with readers. I contend that at the level of language, the poem or piece of poetic writing continues to be stabilised by the allegorical representation of correspondences between the author and the body of sensations. I examine this contention in more detail in Chapters One and Two of this dissertation, ‘The stabilising influence of poetic writing and the poem’s unscribed page’ and ‘Patterning language: Paying attention to ‘pattern’ in T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*’, and I outline these chapters below.

Throughout this dissertation I argue that poetic writing, as allegorical representation, recapitulates and temporarily sustains intensities of authorial sympathy with figural sensations. I argue that this dual function is ongoing, and an important contention within this argument is that allegorical representation does not *confer* stability upon the figural, but is stable *with* it, in ongoing, variable durations of authorial sympathy. Poetic writing remains added to the internally consistent motion of the figural body in itself, in its internally consistent being. Thus the author works with language as a material to sustain poetic attention and participation in transitory, variable durations of representation, rather than binding the figural to language. This leads me to argue that poetic writing is stabilising, as opposed to anchoring or grounding, in order to distinguish allegorical stabilisation as an ongoing effect and function of poetic writing. Such stabilisation is certainly an ideal for successful poetic writing, but nonetheless is a real function. Poetic writing is always representing, always stabilising, and its recapitulation of the original authorial encounter and participation with the figural body remains ongoing. Poetic writing, I argue, is not trying to relay meaning about the

figural to the reader, but to show something of the figural in itself, so as to show something about the author's attentive, participatory encounter with it.

Against my argument for the temporary stabilising effects of allegorical representation may be posed the counter-argument that it is the presence of literal images in poetic writing that enable a reader's access to correspondences between allegory and the figural. I contend, however, that I am making the same argument from a different point of view, focussing on the author rather than the reader. I constrain my scope in this dissertation to the composition of poetic writing in order to produce a process that may be of practical benefit to me as a novelist. My argument is concentrated on the authorial process leading to the moment of poetic composition, when the author strives to add language to sensations which are not in themselves literally graspable or speakable, but with which the author is attentively engaged. This, I argue, is a distinction of focus.

Also against my arguments may be raised the objection that what works for a poem cannot be extrapolated to a novel, and the related question: How long can poetic attention be sustained within the structure of a novel? I demur, and contend that duration is intrinsically variable in relation to poetic attention and poetic writing. Given this, and given my authorial focus in this dissertation, I argue there is no answer to the question, and that the only appropriate authorial response is to create poetic writing. In this dissertation I focus on a certain authorial perspective, that poetic attention can be sustained as long as it is productive and useful for the author, and sympathetic with the sensations to which language is being added. I am concerned more with the *how* of the moment of poetic composition, and *why* it is useful authorially. The reader's expectations of poetic writing are a different line of inquiry. However, I contend that seeking to manage readerly expectations in relation to poetic writing, or seeking to

control the strain that poetic writing may place on a novel's narrative, is in general a matter of editing. Another dissertation might ask how the editorial process for a novel brings poetic writing sufficiently close to the reader, without obscuring crucial correspondences with the opaque movement of the figural in itself.

Perceiving and participating in the opacity of what cannot be sufficiently represented is a key aspect of poetic attention and efforts of poetic writing. In science fiction, the gambit is to represent the opaque and ungraspable, to make an effort to bring language close to alienness. Science fiction in particular, on which I focus my arguments, is a genre that has encouraged and supported such a variety of narrative approaches, including intergenre mixtures, that to conceive of the reader in a general sense in relation to this genre is impracticable.

I argue that poetic attention has use in relation to science fiction because representation of the figural is a crucial component of this genre. I discuss the science fiction genre below, and more thoroughly discuss my creative use of poetic attention in Chapter Three of this dissertation, 'Poetic attention and poetic writing in *Earthship*'. Briefly, in *Earthship* the abstract effects of the alien lelks on my characters' bodies are important connectors between my characters, across the novel's variable chronology. (In the narrative, a historical chronology is created by and narrated by the vague voice of Aux, a neural implant shared among the characters, rather than being related to calendar time.) I used poetic attention and allegorical writing in *Earthship* principally to evoke the physical interactions and motion of lelks, for example in the metaphorical phrase 'lelks cling like burrs to your pelt', which is a way of showing the way lelks persist in relation to the characters' bodies. Using allegorical, poetic writing, I fold in specific descriptions of physical traits of lelks, for example, 'Lelks sparkled the tendrils of lys, fluttering and dashing them in warm pale arcs', and, 'Lelks spun spiderly down

from the haze of lys.’ My intention was to represent, little by little, the abstract variability of this alien form. Leik can be only fleetingly described, but their role in the narrative changes, shifts, flows one way and then another, even as their relationship to Aux’s host bodies remains quite consistent, like a strange kind of loyalty. I favoured abstractness and allegory when writing about the physicality of leik, and brought forward their effects on human bodies and the human physical environment, so as to open up a sense of ungrounded, unpredictable alien motion. Very often this motion takes place opaquely inside, between, and through my main characters’ bodies and lives.

The experimental aspect of my theoretical work in this dissertation is to elaborate a possible model for poetic writing as an allegorical practice of writing. This model, poetic attention, is inspired by two provocations. The first is science fiction novelist Samuel R. Delany’s idea of ‘the model’ in a novelistic context: ‘models for the sentence, models for narrative scenes, and models for larger literary structures’.⁶ For Delany, an author develops a model from extended experience in reading novels, which generates a field of possibility for writing, to which the novelist then submits. Submission to the model gives a degree of control to the way the writer works, , this imprecise, variable process of composition.

As I discuss below in my chapter outlines, I focus tightly on developing and exploring the concept of poetic attention as it relates to science fiction authorship in a poetic mode, with my novel, *Earthship*, being an example of how I put my theory into practice. I emphasise that my own work is the basis for my critical effort here. I am arguing toward a practical outcome for myself, in relation to my work as a science

⁶ SR Delany, ‘Some Notes for the Intermediate and Advanced Creative Writing Student’ in *About Writing: Seven Essays, Four Letters, and Five Interviews*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, 2005, electronic edition.

fiction novelist. Ultimately what I seek is a way of conceiving of an allegorical practice of writing that I can deploy consistently, if only in temporary efforts, in science fiction novels. Poetic attention is the process underlying my practice. To turn poetic attention into a formula for poetic writing is a self-defeating exercise, but I strive to find a way to make the process repeatable and useful.

Chapter outlines

To introduce this dissertation, I give an overview of critical descriptions of the science fiction genre, showing the openness of science fiction to other genres and styles of writing, and science fiction's intrinsic support of open-ended narratives. Darko Suvin's concept of 'the novum' has long been the touchstone for science fiction criticism.⁷ The novum is a scientifically reasonable innovation that is the radical propellant for the narrative. Stylistic innovation has also played an important role in the history of science fiction. I note the innovation sponsored by *New Worlds* magazine under author Michael Moorcock's editorship, highlighting Pamela Zoline's short story 'The Heat Death of the Universe'.⁸

Innovation at the level of language is an important aspect of stylistic innovation in science fiction, and I direct my overview toward examining the role of language, with reference to Fredric Jameson's work on representation and allegory. Arguing that science fiction is essentially allegorical, as it turns on representations of the figural, alien, or speculative, I connect this allegorical essence to the crisis of representation that Jameson highlights.⁹ In the first instance, language cannot directly speak the

⁷ D Suvin, D, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1979.

⁸ P Zoline, 'The Heat Death of the Universe' in J Lasbalestier (ed.) *Daughters of Earth: Feminist Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, 2006, pp. 130–143.

⁹ F Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*.

unspeakable, or think the unthinkable, so all efforts to represent the figural using language fall short. However, at the level of language, science fiction makes the effort to represent the figural anyway, in full consciousness of the insufficiency of language. To orient toward poetic attention, I reframe the representational effort as an effort to pay attention to, and participate with, information that does pass between what can and cannot be represented.

I argue there is a correspondence between science fiction and poetry, in the way they share the focussed effort to use language that represents the figural both literally and allegorically. An allegorical practice of writing then becomes one of participating, attentively and linguistically, with the figural in itself; with patterns in fields of possibility generated by vague but internally consistent correspondences between figural sensations and corporealities. Poetic writing, formalised in poetry, is both in language, and in between language and the figural. Poetic writing is a participatory representational correspondence with the field of possibility that does not respond to an ideal of direct communication. Thus, the problem that all representation is essentially partial also makes the poem work as an allegory of attention, as it is a subjective, participatory device the reader can use to see or listen to the figural.

Establishing a basis for my analyses of poetic attention and poetic writing in Chapters One to Three, I argue that the primary work for the poem comes at ‘the moment of recognition, the sudden contact between images.’¹⁰ At this moment, poetic writing temporarily holds open routes or passages for readerly participation in what is passing between the author and figural, poetic sensations, the vague corporealities which generate internally consistent fields of possibility to which the author strives to add language. Science fiction novels similarly hold open passages which permit a

¹⁰ J Peterkiewicz, p. 44.

reader to encounter the author's perception of correspondences between the speculative and the known, the pre-material figural and representational language.

Providing philosophical elaboration to the problem of representing the figural, I discuss Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of the 'anexact'. This concept, 'anexactitude', describes material essences which are not fixed in form, and whose real corporealities are perceived in-between states of things. Deleuze and Guattari propose the description 'anexact yet rigorous' to describe the essential but varying inexactness of these anexact or vague essences.¹¹ For example, 'roundness' is an anexact essence, where 'circle' or 'ball' are things. I describe similarities between science fiction and poetry, in terms of their representation of anexact corporealities. Science fiction texts and poems can be thought of in terms of *world*-building and *word*-building: Science fiction tends to focus on building a world to represent the figural narratively, while poetry focuses on building the word to represent the figural linguistically.

I argue that the allegorical functions of science fiction and poetry, at the level of language, are similar and shared. Thus, it is useful to me, a science fiction writer, to explore and attempt innovative readings of poems, so as to improve my understanding of how poetic writing represents figural forms and essences, as well as bodily experiences that resist representation in language. Physical pain is an example of the latter. Pain features in *Earthship* as an unrepresentable experience that is shared across time and between bodies; Satu's pain is passed on genetically to her daughter Lasja.

Pain has a powerful connection with language, Elaine Scarry argues, in that pain 'does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes

¹¹ G Deleuze and F Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. B Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987, p. 367. Deleuze and Guattari expanded on the work of Edmund Husserl to develop their concept of the anexact: A Beaulieu 'Edmund Husserl' in *Deleuze's Philosophical Lineage*, eds G Jones and J Roffe, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2009, p. 265.

before language is learned.¹² Scarry stresses that pain's resistance to language is not only an attribute of it, but rather 'essential to what it is.'¹³ Because physical pain is a vague, anexact, variable experience, pain assessment handbooks use adjectival language and metaphor to model the experience of a body in pain. For example, 'knifelike', 'radiating', 'shooting', 'sharp', 'burning' pain.¹⁴ The description 'stabbing, burning pain' is a representation that reaches toward a non-specific, fluctuating essence. Symbolic, allegorical representation of pain in language is an effort to say something specific about the physicality of a variable pain encounter.

In science fiction and in poetry, there is a productive stabilising correspondence between the representational and the allegorical movements of language. This correspondence is strictly temporary, transitory: the allegorical movement stabilises representation of the figural even as language fails to sufficiently represent, while the representational movement temporarily stabilises ways of paying attention to the figural in itself, pre-material. These movements are slippery, temporary, but sympathetic in the duration of the allegorical representation.

Pulling back slightly from the level of language, I argue that the formal codes of the science fiction genre and poetry support literal and allegorical readings that sympathetically, temporarily, stabilise each other. The codes by which texts in science fiction are composed act as a tacit agreement between author and reader that a literal meaning, in context of the narrative, will invite the readerly pleasure of moving literal and allegorical meanings closer together, thus to participate, in a transitory way, in paying attention to the anexact referent. This is the pleasure of paying attention as the author pays attention, and I emphasise again the temporariness of the stabilisation. For

¹² E Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1985, electronic edition.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ C Pasero and M McCaffery, *Pain Assessment and Pharmacologic Management*, Mosby Elsevier, St Louis, 2011, p. 52.

me, poetic writing is foremost language that reaches, strives, is in motion, paying attention itself to the unreachable, the ungraspable. An author participates in the way language moves with the figural, though the figural in itself remains ever out of reach, it always slips away, and language remains insufficient material. I contend that in spite of this insufficiency, poetic writing contains a hope that the failure of representation will show something ungraspable, if necessarily vague, about the human effort to encounter what cannot be grasped, cannot be fixed or captured. Access to the moment of encounter is a key objective of poetic writing. To round out this Introduction, I discuss the novels, poetry, and stories in relation to which I have situated *Earthship*.

In Chapters One to Three, I pivot to analysis of poetry in order to develop an allegorical model for my work writing science fiction novels. This pivot is made on the broad basis, as above, that the science fiction novel and the poem are both texts in codified fields of possibility, and both encounter representation of the figural as a key creative problem, at the level of language. In science fiction and poetry, language represents to the reader the becoming-world in terms of the becoming-word. Formal codes of science fiction and poetry ballast these representations, which are, in Deleuze and Guattari's terms, 'the exact passage of that which is under way.'¹⁵

My model, which I call 'poetic attention', is composed of four movements: Attention, encounter, participation, and event of writing. An author pays attention to poetic sensations in motion in a field of possibility, making an intuitive effort to encounter the sensations in motion; by participating in the motion of sensations, an author detects patterns of intensities in the field, and in a language event, an event of poetic writing, temporarily patterns language in relation to these patterns. Participation

¹⁵ G Deleuze and F Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 2.

is the crux of this process. The event of poetic writing is an effort to hold open a passage or route to further encounters with patterns in the anexact or vague sensations.

By this model, poetic writing becomes the work of making language correspond as closely as possible with the attentive effort of participation with the figural in itself. This implies a temporary, transitory way of writing, owing to the insufficiency of representation that Jameson argues. Every effort of poetic attention is a new effort; Peterkiewicz writes that ‘the poet has everything to gain by recognizing new patterns in new moments’, without being patterned into re-presenting the same patterns, the same moments.¹⁶

To elucidate poetic attention, in relation to an allegorical practice of writing, in Chapters One and Two I explore ways of perceiving what is under way in the poems of Paul Celan and T.S. Eliot. In Chapter One, ‘The stabilising influence of poetic writing and the poem’s uninscribed page’, undertake an analysis Paul Celan’s poetics to show how his poetic language moves extremely close to the anexact essences of traumatic, painful physical experience. After discussing critical approaches to reading Celan’s poetry, I explore his poetic attention, arguing that a poem, literally and allegorically, is a representation in language of patterns in a body of poetic sensations, which is a living, varying, mobile thing itself. The field of possibility for the poem is generated by variable relationships within this body of sensations. I explore the relationship between author and poem, in relation to Celan’s poetics, before drawing a correspondence between this analysis and science fiction through a close reading of the use of the poetic word ‘dawn’ in a passage from Samuel R. Delany’s novel *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*.¹⁷ I look at how Delany’s use of the word stabilises the speculative

¹⁶ J Peterkiewicz, p. 41–42.

¹⁷ SR Delany, *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, 1984.

experience of leaving a world at dawn by figuratively illuminating the experience with the light of dawn. Finally I examine the relationship between inscribed and uninscribed space on the Celanian page, arguing that uninscribed page space is part of the allegorical movement of poetic writing. The uninscribed page also helps a reader understand the limits of the poem's capacity for representation.

In Chapter Two: 'Patterning language: Paying attention to 'pattern' in T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*', I examine the crucial participatory aspect of poetic attention. I undertake a close reading of the idea and effect of the word 'pattern', used to varying effect, in T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*.¹⁸ Building on my analysis in Chapter One, I argue that poetic writing is also an event of participation with bodies of sensations, as an author patterns language material in correspondence with temporary patterns of intensities in sensations. In making my close reading, I refer to the literary criticism around the method called 'surface reading', which describes the way a critic reads the surfaces of texts, and focus my analysis on the correspondences in motion between language and sensations.¹⁹ I map a route from 'pattern' to 'pattern' across the *Four Quartets*, looking at how Eliot builds the word.

In the final chapter, 'Poetic attention and poetic writing in *Earthship*', I analyse some of the ways I use poetic writing in *Earthship*. I argue that poetic attention and poetic writing in this novel stabilise allegorical readings in relation to figural corporealities and vague essences, including the 'vague voice' of the narrative. I look at the way I constitute the alien species 'lelk', both in terms of building the word, and in terms of lelk's relationship with human bodies, particularly Lasja's and her mother Satu's. I examine the way that two narrative devices, the drug Dream and the neural

¹⁸ TS Eliot, *Four Quartets*, Faber and Faber, London, 2001.

¹⁹ S Best and S Marcus, 'Surface Reading: An Introduction', *Representations*, no. 108, 2009, pp. 1–21.

implant Aux, sustain correspondences between characters in the narrative, before looking at how uninscribed space brings language closer to silence or obscurity. Lastly I discuss the way the poetic language of the section titles orients the obscure narrative voice, a vague voice which in its way is making an effort to speak about humanness, about the experience of having a human body.

On the science fiction genre

In the first instance, the corpus of critical work on science fiction addresses the considerable difficulty of defining science fiction as a genre. Any number of critical perspectives on this matter focus on the corpus of science fiction, the way science fiction is received, in particular by fans, and the way science fiction is written, in terms of style and the way language is used. In addition, the genre is informed by the science fiction megatext, the corpus of knowledge about science fiction shared and mutually developed by authors, critics, and fans. This is itself a slippery concept, Brian Attiebery points out, in that the megatext is open to change over time, operating as a ‘field of possibility’²⁰ common to writers in a durational cohort in the genre. Participatory development of the megatext by authors, publishers, and readers critiques and reshapes it.

As a foundational point, Derek J. Thiess notes that many scholars differentiate science fiction from realistic fiction, because science fiction has the freedom to diverge from existing knowledge and technologies, and speculate on topics that realistic fiction may not.²¹ Surveying the properties of speculation in science fiction has led to the division between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’, where hard science fiction concerns itself with

²⁰ B Attiebery, ‘The Closing of the Final Frontier: Science Fiction after 1960’ in J Sanders ed. *Functions of the Fantastic: Selected Essays from the Thirteenth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts*, Greenwood Press, Westport, 1995, p. 210.

²¹ DJ Thiess, *Embodying Gender and Age in Speculative Fiction: A Biopsychosocial Approach*, Routledge, New York and London, 2016, p. 2.

physically plausible extrapolations from existing science and technology, while soft science fiction at most uses scientific and cognitive extrapolations as the dressing for a story whose concerns are in the social sciences.

Octavia E. Butler's novel *Dawn*, for example, the first in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, can be read as soft science fiction.²² In terms of critical themes it is an African-American, feminist, and allegorical²³ examination of individuality contained and controlled by biological hierarchy. After a nuclear holocaust, Lilith, a black human female, is returned to life on an Oankali ship, and the alien Oankali steadily induce her to interbreed with one of them, allegedly to their mutual benefit. Oankali reproductive technology is certainly a conceivable extrapolation in relation to human reproductive technologies, but the adventure with technology is subordinate to the relational space of the novel, and Butler's stylistic territory is distinct from the stylistic territory of a hard science fiction novelist. Greg Egan's hard science fiction novels, for example, are oriented around existing mathematical or scientific circumstances and questions related to them. *Permutation City*, for example, is an extrapolation of cloud computing and transhumanism, in which people can scan and upload so-called Copies of themselves that have their own conscious experience in the context of the virtual reality.²⁴ The technological, scientific line of inquiry is the novel's primary concern, so that it is more literally science fictionalised. Both Butler and Egan are principals in the science fiction megatext; science fiction easily accommodates both perceptual and stylistic approaches.

The critical task of defining science fiction is complicated by any number of sub-genres, which offer many entry-points: Space opera, cyberpunk, New Wave, New

²² OE Butler, *Dawn*, Warner Books, New York, 1987.

²³ Fredric Jameson argues that in Butler's work 'the presupposition of alien life in the first place ... can, to be sure, stand as the allegory of race'. Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, p. 140.

²⁴ G Egan, *Permutation City*, Night Shade Books, New York, 2014.

Weird, science fantasy, afrofuturism, SF romance, speculative poetry, planetary romance... These subgenres are useful organisational categories for readers, and in this sense shows the usefulness of a genre per se in organising information about patterns of and in texts. Broadly, a genre is a shared field in which a variable cultural, social, creative process operates, by which people organise a large amount of information into discrete and manageable categories.²⁵ Genre is the tool which allows us to share, discuss, historicise, critique, assess and reassess parcels of cultural information. It can be personal, intellectual, social, political; it can endow a system of cultural production with power, which cultural production can feed (under the bias of its perspective) back into the genre. Thus, the megatext can change over time. For example, the presentation of women as exotic, sexualised beings in science fiction movies echoes the tendency of capitalist cultural production to programmatically sexualise women.²⁶

Perspectives on the publishing history of science fiction also have a role to play in the genre's definition. Hugo Gernsback first used the term 'science fiction' to describe and promote magazine fiction he was publishing in the 1920s, and the early tropes of this expression of the genre (space travel, alien encounters, planetary romance) developed in an American context, as the popularisation of science expanded.²⁷ Attebery also notes the importance of fandom in the development of a science fiction subculture in this American context: Gernsback encouraged fan letters from magazine

²⁵ G Creeber, 'Genre Theory' in G Creeber (ed.), *The Television Genre Book*, 3rd Edition, Palgrave/British Film Institute, London, 2015, p. 1.

²⁶ S Rose, 'When it comes to interracial romances, the movies need to catch up' in *The Guardian*, 13 May 2016, <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/12/when-it-comes-to-interracial-romances-the-movies-need-to-catch-up>>, viewed 3 August 2017.

²⁷ B Attebery, 'Science Fictional Parables: Jazz, Geometry, and Generation Starships' in B Attebery and V Hollinger ed. *Parables of Science Fiction*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, 2013, p. 18.

readers, and social clubs and conventions formed around readers' mutual passion for science fiction.²⁸

In an interview with *The Believer*, science fiction and fantasy author China Miéville articulates the flexibility of science fiction and the way it is open to many ideas, as long as the narrative is recognisably science fiction:

What I tried to do is write something which works as an exciting story but which treats the politics seriously. ... I'm trying to say I've invented this world that I think is really cool and I have these really big stories to tell in it and one of the ways that I find to make that interesting is to think about it politically. If you want to do that too, that's fantastic. But if not, isn't this a cool monster?²⁹

Science fiction can accommodate the juxtaposition of politics and monsters, for example, on the basis that what Darko Suvin calls the 'novum' is recognisably science-based, and the 'cognitive estrangement' results from a cognitively reasonable, science-based, or, I argue, science-fiction-based, hypothesis.³⁰ Suvin's novum is the radical narrative activator from which the narrative opens out across a plane of non-naturalistic cognitive estrangement.³¹ Suvin makes a distinction between the science-based novum of science fiction and the myth-based novum of folk tale or myth. In folk tale, as in fantasy, the novum is another world cut off from this reality. I would add that in the context of the science fiction megatext, the novum can be science-fiction-based and function for the narrative in the same way. Author Michael Moorcock argues that science is the mythos of science fiction;³² and in the context of the megatext science fiction texts are also part of the mythos.

²⁸ *ibid.* Also notable is the history of the relationship between capitalism and science fiction fandom in the American context, which has given rise to, for example, the enormous San Diego Comicon, a major industry event for Hollywood movie studios who produce science fiction films.

²⁹ L Anders, 'China Miéville' in *The Believer* April 2005,

<http://www.believermag.com/issues/200504/?read=interview_mieville>, Viewed 3 August 2017.

³⁰ D Suvin, p. 4.

³¹ *ibid.*, pp. 20, 64, 67, 70

³² ME Papke, 'A Space of Her Own: Pamela Zoline's "The Heat Death of the Universe"' in ed. J Lasbalestier *Daughters of Earth: Feminist Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, 2006, p. 148.

Science fiction makes use of the fantastical, but as a rule of thumb stops short of magic. In Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* the idea of the replicant is the novum, the concept of an autonomous artificial humanoid with a defined lifespan.³³ It is fantastical but thinkable. It asks for an experimental reader (to an extent even understanding the word 'replicant' is a language experiment), but the setting and the way characters behave are recognisable—radical, but recognisable. Mary E. Papke argues that reading science fiction is a participatory pleasure at the level of language, and readers 'must work at a constant decoding of each paragraph, phrase, and even word to construct and thus come to understand the text's world and what it might mean to this world.'³⁴ There is a readerly pleasure in the way science fiction takes language apart and reconstructs it, and, reciprocally, an authorial pleasure in the way science fiction allows radical access to other genres which use language differently, creating subgenres that blend in the Western (steampunk), the historical novel (alternate history), the romance novel (science fiction romance), and the adventure story (space opera).

Inconsequential gestures toward science do not necessarily exclude a text from the science fiction canon, such as with *Star Wars*, which utilises the fantastical novum of The Force.³⁵ That *Star Wars* is science fiction gives licence to critics to consider texts which are similarly allegorical and stylised as science fiction. Consequently, Brooks Landon's argument that science fiction is 'a set of attitudes and expectations about the future'³⁶ can be interpreted stylistically: science fiction is a set of stylistic attitudes and expectations about the future. In science fiction short stories and novels, the set of stylistic attitudes includes stylistic innovation at the level of narrative, form, and

³³ PK Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? Filmed as Blade Runner*, Millennium, London, 1999.

³⁴ ME Papke, pp. 149–150.

³⁵ G Lucas, dir, *Star Wars: Episode IV — A New Hope*, Lucasfilm, Twentieth Century Fox, San Francisco, CA, 1977.

³⁶ Landon in Papke, p. 149.

language. For example, Pamela Zoline's 1967 story 'The Heat Death of the Universe',³⁷ published in Michael Moorcock's *New Worlds* science fiction magazine, interleaves scientific facts with a fragmented, stylistically experimental story of a woman's deeply fractured experience of being herself and a mother and a wife. Thus on the same page: 'The second law of thermodynamics can be interpreted to mean that the ENTROPY of a closed system tends toward a maximum...' is juxtaposed with: 'Beds made. Vacuuming the hall, a carpet of faded flowers, vines and leaves which endlessly wind and twist into each other in a fevered and permanent ecstasy.'³⁸ In style, subject, and form, Zoline's story calls to mind Clarice Lispector's *Água Viva*, published in 1973, a meditation on her life and the passage of time.³⁹ Both texts explore 'relational spaces'⁴⁰ and the way women move through and share such spaces, as well as the subjective relational space of the mind. Both, in their way, as Papke argues, 'defamiliarise what is accepted as the real and to make us question the most common assumptions we have about human affiliations and desires.'⁴¹ Then what makes Zoline's story science fiction, and Lispector's literary fiction? The context of publication, the way the stories are disseminated, but equally the cohorts in which the authors moved as they wrote. Papke highlights Zoline's view that strict boundaries between kinds of fiction are, from the point of view of the author, rather more fluid than they are, necessarily, for critics—the critic, striving to say something concrete about science fiction texts, requires more definition than the author. Zoline considered her cohort, which included Moorcock, John Clute, John Sladek, and J.G. Ballard, gave

³⁷ P Zoline, 'The Heat Death of the Universe' in ed. J Lasbalestier *Daughters of Earth: Feminist Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, 2006, pp. 130–143.

³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 134.

³⁹ C Lispector, *Água Viva*, trans. S Tobler, B Moser (ed.), Penguin Classics, London, 2014.

⁴⁰ ME Papke, p. 145.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 147.

her a ‘neighbourhood’ for her stories.⁴² The author’s subjectivity is perceptual and social, as well as textual.

An earlier European history of science fiction focused more on philosophy, satire, and subverting established literary forms and genres, and provided a model for the kind of fiction Hugo Gernsback later published.⁴³ Key works of the European history include Thomas More’s *Utopia*, Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and these inspired the literary works of Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, and Edgar Allan Poe.⁴⁴ Poe’s final published work, *Eureka: A Prose Poem*, is an intriguing example of the cross-fertilisation of serious scientific study and fictional conjecture, in which Poe renders his scientific extrapolations in poetic prose with a dual focus on producing entertaining and poetic writing. Here he postulates a multiverse:

Let me declare, only, that, as an individual, I feel myself impelled to the *fancy*—without daring to call it more—that there does exist a *limitless* succession of Universes, more or less similar to that of which we have cognizance—to that of which *alone* we shall ever have cognizance—at the very least until the return of our own particular Universe into Unity.⁴⁵

He also shows his perception of the relationships between things, with a kind of spiritual or metaphysical intention which thematically, and stylistically, moves in the direction of science fiction:

[O]f the rising of to-morrow’s sun—a probability that as yet lies in the future—I do not pretend to be one thousandth part as sure—as I am of the irretrievably by-gone *Fact* that All Things and All Thoughts of Things with all their ineffable Multiplicity of Relation, sprang at once into being from the primordial and irrelative *One*.⁴⁶

In terms of style, Poe’s poetic writing brings to my mind the beauty of the texts in the classical historical corpus. I’m reminded of the way Pliny the Younger begins his

⁴² *ibid.*, p. 146.

⁴³ B Attebery, ‘Science Fictional Parabolas’, p. 18.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ EA Poe, *Eureka: A Prose Poem*, <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/p/poe/edgar_allan/p74eu/>, Viewed 2 August 2017.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

second letter to the historian Tacitus, concerning his uncle, Pliny the Elder, who had travelled to closely witness the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD, and who was, there, overcome by the deadly air.⁴⁷ Pliny begins by quoting poetry, Virgil's *Aeneid*: 'Though my mind shrinks from remembering... I will begin' and gives an account in which poetic prose is layered over the extraordinary event of the volcanic eruption:

On the landward side a fearful black cloud was rent by forked and quivering bursts of flame, and parted to reveal great tongues of fire, like flashes of lightning magnified in size.⁴⁸

Were Pliny's report related to the eruption of Olympus Mons on Mars, perhaps we could call it science fiction.

Brian Attebery and Veronica Hollinger have more recently proposed 'the parabola' as a metaphor and model for thinking about how science fiction narratives move.⁴⁹ Parabolas bring to the fore the combinatory, participatory, collaborate nature of science fiction; Attebery and Hollinger describe the parabola as 'more concrete than themes, more complex than motifs,... combinations of meaningful setting, character and action that lend themselves to endless redefinition and jazzlike improvisation.'⁵⁰ Parabolas of different kinds run through the science genre, and these aim to describe different ways that the megatext overall maintains an open-ended narrative movement, always in the direction of the unknown. Genre parabolas, which historicise and show the transformation of the genre over time, have the additional advantage, for Attebery, that

⁴⁷ On the subject of historical witness, Fredric Jameson notes that Darko Suvin's theory of cognitive estrangement 'would seem to continue a long tradition of critical emphasis on verisimilitude from Aristotle on (who famously explained that history only describes what did happen, while "poetry"—in the larger sense—describes happenings probable or believable).' F Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, p. 63.

⁴⁸ Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, Letter 6.20, <<http://www.u.arizona.edu/~afutrell/404b/web%20rds/pliny%20on%20vesuvius.htm>>, trans. B Radice, Viewed 2 August 2017.

⁴⁹ B Attebery and V Hollinger, 'Parabolas of Science Fiction' in B Attebery and V Hollinger (eds) *Parabolas of Science Fiction*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, 2013, pp. vii–xiv.

⁵⁰ *ibid.* p. vii.

they ‘allow stories to function both figuratively and literally’ without requiring either to dominate.⁵¹

Situating *Earthship* as science fiction:

William S. Burroughs, Samuel R. Delany, Doris Piserchia

My novel *Earthship* is situated in the science fiction genre in relation to a triangle of key texts that problematise the human body, and the representation of the figural at the level of language. My key reference points are certain texts that have shaped my view of what kinds of writing can become part of the science fiction megatext, and how language can be brought close to obscure experiences of the human body, such as dreams and mental illness, using poetic writing. The three texts are William S. Burroughs’s short story ‘They Do Not Always Remember’; Samuel R. Delany’s *The Einstein Intersection*, and Doris Piserchia’s *Star Rider*.⁵²

Foremost among these, for me, is Burroughs’s story ‘They Do Not Always Remember’, originally published in *Esquire* in May 1966.⁵³ Burroughs’s writing procedure became to take text or voices from multiple sources, including poetry, and either cut them up and reading across recombined cuttings, or fold them together for a similar spontaneous reading, or transcribe what he heard into fictional context. Burroughs calls ‘They Do Not Always Remember’ a direct transcription of a dream.⁵⁴ It is a strange story of a writer in Monterrey, Mexico, writing in a notebook in a plaza café, near a fountain. A man approaches, produces an invisible badge, and takes the

⁵¹ B Attebery, ‘Science Fictional Parabolas’, p. 29.

⁵² WS Burroughs, ‘They Do Not Always Remember’ in *Exterminator!*, The Viking Press, New York, 1973, pp. 133–136. SR Delany, *The Einstein Intersection*, Bantam Books, New York, 1967. D Piserchia, *Star Rider*, Bantam Books, New York, 1974.

⁵³ P Stephensen-Payne (ed.), ‘The FictionMags Index: Burroughs, William S(eward)’, *Galactic Central*, <<http://www.philsp.com/homeville/FMI/s/s1367.htm#A25914>>, viewed 23 August 2017.

⁵⁴ WS Burroughs, ‘William S. Burroughs class on writing sources, July, 1976’, Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, 1976, <https://archive.org/details/Burroughs_class_on_writing_sources_July_1976_76P020>, viewed 23 August 2017. O Harris, ‘“Burroughs Is a Poet Too, Really”: The Poetics of *Minutes to Go*’, *Reality Studio*, <<http://realitystudio.org/scholarship/burroughs-is-a-poet-too-really-the-poetics-of-minutes-to-go/>>, viewed 23 August 2017.

notebook from the writer. He takes it to a policeman who is standing a short distance away. They converse in Spanish, before the policeman sends the man to stand and wait by the fountain. The policeman tells a rambling, elliptical story about two policemen, Rodriguez and Alfaro, the latter an obsessive officer who was hit by a car by the fountain where the other man is waiting. Having heard the story, the writer, paying for Rodriguez's coffee, is arrested on the spot for passing counterfeit notes. Alfaro, the man waiting, comes over from the fountain to intervene, and sends Rodriguez to stand by the fountain. Alfaro now begins to tell the story of Alfaro and Rodriguez, but the writer leaps up and arrests him for dealing drugs:

"I am the FBI señor ... the Federal Police of Mexico. Allow me." He took the note and held it up to the light smiling he handed it back to me. He said something to Rodriguez who walked out and stood by the fountain. I noticed for the first time that he was not carrying a pistol. Alfaro looked after him shaking his head sadly. "You have time for a coffee señor? I will tell you a story." "That's enough!" I pulled a card out of my wallet and snapped crisply "I am District Supervisor Lee of the American Narcotics Department and I am arresting you and your accomplice Rodriguez for acting in concert to promote the sale of narcotics ... caffeine among other drugs ..."55

A fourth man now intervenes, an Irishman, Harry. He tells the writer to go stand by the fountain, and the implication is that this cycle continues, spreading like a memory virus. It is a creepy story, whose language induces the sensation of allegory, even of parable, though there is no moral lesson, and seemingly no escape from the cycle of memory and forgetting. Literal and allegorical functions of language are swirled together, and the story threatens to dissipate as if a radio signal into static, but this is always averted by the introduction of a new element. The new element, somehow anticipated but not understandable, is part of the story's memory, and has the quality of

⁵⁵ WS Burroughs, 'They Do Not Always Remember', pp. 135–136.

having been read but forgotten. The new element brings the possibility of meaning, but the story does not. The story ends thus:

A hand touched my shoulder. I looked up. A greyhaired Irishman was standing there with calm authority the face portentous and distant as if I were recovering consciousness after a blow on the head. They do not always remember. "Go over there by the fountain Bill. I'll look into this." I could feel his eyes on my back see the sad head shake hear him order two coffees in excellent Spanish ... dry fountain empty square silver paper in the wind frayed sounds of distant city ... everything grey and fuzzy ... my mind isn't working right ... who are you over there telling the story of Harry and Bill? ... The square clicked back into focus. My mind cleared. I walked toward the café with calm authority.⁵⁶

Ellipses throughout the story help us pass over the failure of language to represent the figural. The ellipses show a passage to the silence Burroughs's language is close to. There is a structural function to these imperfections, the fragmentation of sentences: they give the story the quality of a person paying attention, but hearing unclearly. Peterkiewicz refers to Polish poet Cyprian Norwid's concept *przemilczenie*, 'something passed over in silence' to describe the way that there is a 'double conveyance of meaning' in speech: 'What the second sentence announces was in the previous sentence unsaid, that is, passed over in silence', so that 'silence prepares the voice for passage from phrase to phrase.'⁵⁷ Burroughs's ellipses, and his fragmented style, are an effort to capture not only phrases of language, but what passes between phrases, what passes between bodies when language falters.

Peterkiewicz argues that *przemilczenie* has a historical function as well, at the level of language: 'each age hands down to the next the latent voice of that which it kept unsaid or could not say.'⁵⁸ In terms of thinking about how to use language innovatively, how to organise representations of figural experiences that occur within the human

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p. 136.

⁵⁷ J Peterkiewicz, p. 70.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p. 72.

body and the vague fluctuations of the mind, *Earthship* is indebted to ‘They Do Not Always Remember’. To place Burroughs’s story in the context of science fiction publishing, it is clear that the story entered into the science fiction megatext through its inclusion in *SF12*, the last in a series of influential science fiction anthologies, edited by Judith Merril and published in 1968.⁵⁹

Meanwhile, Burroughs had produced cut-up novels such as *The Soft Machine* and *Nova Express*, whose deep intervention into science fiction occurred at the level of composition theory and language.⁶⁰ I argue that Burroughs’s efforts were to represent cognitive dissonance both in language and of language. In this respect, Burroughs preceded the anthologising of cognitive dissonance under the term ‘slipstream’. Slipstream is a ‘literary effect’ rather than a sub-genre, which allegorises the multiplicitous, multisensory experience of twenty-first century life by weaving a science fictional narrative (often with fantastical elements) around and through very different ways of writing, different genres, and varying effects at the level of language and composition.⁶¹ Burroughs wrote in the obscure gaps between what can be spoken and what resists language, at the moments where language tended to fail, embracing the possibility of language destruction, and positioning his work as a conversation between the human body, the present time, and technologies that open passages for bodies toward the future. In *Nova Express*, language itself is a novum. Language activates the essential cognitive estrangement and dissonance in the narrative. The route the novel takes toward a vague and fractured future is ‘the river of all language’:

“The Subliminal Kid” moved in and took over bars cafés and juke boxes
of the world cities and installed radio transmitters and microphones in

⁵⁹ J Merril, (ed.), *SF12*, Delacorte Press, New York, 1968.

⁶⁰ WS Burroughs, *Nova Express*, Grove Press, New York, 1964; *The Soft Machine*, Grove Press, New York, 1992.

⁶¹ JJ Adams, ‘Award-winning authors James Patrick Kelly and John Kessel team up as editors to define a genre that ... well ... isn’t’, *Science Fiction Weekly*, June 12, 2006, <<https://web.archive.org/web/20060615021123/http://www.scifi.com/sfw/interviews/sfw12963.html>>, viewed 23 August 2017.

each bar so that the music and talk of any bar could be heard in all his bars and he had tape recorders in each bar that played and recorded at arbitrary intervals and his agents moved back and forth with portable tape recorders and brought back street sound and talk and music and poured it into his recorder array so he set waves and eddies and tornadoes of sound down all your streets and by the river of all language—Word dust drifted streets of broken music car horns and air hammers—The Word broken pounded twisted exploded in smoke—

Word Falling ///⁶²

The river of language; the allegorical flow of signals, media, sounds, vision in the modern world, carries the word. Burroughs is prepared to experiment with words as molecular matter of the novel-body, and he is prepared to record the body as it decays: Burroughs is prepared to let the word, in the grip of dissonance, break down. As representation fails, both allegorically and literally, the failed word passes in silence. In the above excerpt, failed language passes over the three strokes in silence, and is picked up by the word that comes after. Burroughs resumes with what the word has left unspoken.

In Burroughs's writing I read his ongoing effort to write along passages of what passes between words, between ideas, between events of composition. His allegorical practice is, for me, strikingly energetic, and poetic in the way he implicates every word in the construction of a network of correspondences which are a becoming-world. From his writing I derive the idea of science fiction that allegorises humanness, the human experience, through a linguistic drama, where word by word struggles to say something human, and fails, and struggles again. In this, I find a correspondence with my interest in Paul Celan's fractured, stammering poetics, and the attention he pays to each word, in a process of groping toward a way of speaking what resists language. Burroughs's solution to the problem of insufficiency of representation is the opposite to Rimbaud's:

⁶² WS Burroughs, *Nova Express*, p. 129.

Where Rimbaud fell silent, renouncing poetry⁶³, Burroughs wrote more, with utmost attention, taking in all the language he could and moving it through his work.

The premise of Samuel R. Delany's novel *The Einstein Intersection* is that in the far future, an alien race, now dominant on Earth, live out ancient human myths. The present story is that of Orpheus, with the protagonist Lobey journeying in search of his lost love Friza. Two aspects of my reading of *The Einstein Intersection* helped to organise my composition of *Earthship*. The first is the way Delany moves the narrative style of the novel toward poetry to make a stylistic context for language to move poetically, word to word. Delany focuses on the role of language in representing the world:

“... Lobey, Earth, the world, fifth planet from the sun—the species that stands on two legs and roams this thin wet crust: it's changing, Lobey. It's not the same. [...] We have taken over their abandoned world, and something new is happening to the fragments, something we can't even define with mankind's leftover vocabulary. You must take its importance exactly as that: it is indefinable; you are involved in it; it is wonderful, fearful, deep, ineffable to your explanations, opaque to your efforts to see through it; yet it demands you take journeys, defines your stopping and starting points [...]”⁶⁴

Like Burroughs's work, Delany's novel strives to represent the poetic in-between-ness of language in science fiction. The literal representation of the figural or alien, in spite of the insufficiency of language to do so, is a primary pleasure of science fiction at the level of language; the reader participates in the passage of language toward the alien. I argue that this pleasure is also that of poetry, and Delany's poetic attention in *The Einstein Intersection* is foregrounded by the numerous poetic quotations which head each chapter, in place of chapter numbers. Indeed, the novel's first words are a quote from *Finnegan's Wake* by James Joyce: ‘It darkles, (tinct, tint) all this our

⁶³ W Fowlie, ‘Introduction’ in *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters*, trans. W Fowlie, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005, p. xxxiii.

⁶⁴ SR Delany, *The Einstein Intersection*, p. 120.

funanimal world.’⁶⁵ And the following chapter-heading quote might be read as a mission statement for the novel’s way of paying attention:

*I
think of people sighing over poetry, using it,
I
don’t know what it’s for . . .
“Oh, I’ll give your bores back!”*

Joanne Kyger/*The Pigs for Circe in May*⁶⁶

Delany writes: ‘My ear is a funnel for all voice and trill and warble you can conceive this day.’⁶⁷ His problematisation of syntax and vocabulary is as important to *Earthship* as the problematisation of representation, and his foregrounding of the poetic as the pre-text of each chapter remains a striking creative move, even in the context of science fiction. My poetic attention in *Earthship* has been inspired by Delany’s linguistic daring, and I discuss some of my choices related to poetic attention and poetic writing in Chapter Three of this dissertation.

Doris Piserchia’s *Star Rider* is the third novel in my triangle of key influences. The storyline is wonderfully bizarre: Jade and her telepathic, dimension-jumping space horse Hinx travel freely through the universe in search of the last remaining mystery, the planet Doubleluck. Bibliographer Liz Henry calls *Star Rider* ‘The ultimate feminist sci fi novel’, pointing out that, inter alia, Jade’s adventure to liberate planet Gibraltar, ‘where the gibs work themselves to death in a sexist cultural wasteland, and the dreens hog all the power.’⁶⁸ The narrative leaps in *Earthship* are modelled on the dazzling, energetic fluidity with which characters move around in Piserchia’s world. Her

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p. 1.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, p. 110.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ L Henry, ‘Doris Piserchia’s science fiction novels’, *Feminist Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Utopia*, L Quilter (ed.), <<http://feministsf.org/authors/piserchia/novels.html>>, viewed 24 August 2017.

narrative leaps are organised in *Star Rider* in relation to Jade's voice. Piserchia narrates in the first person, a voice which functions as a scaffolding to support figural ways of moving that are built up in language as the novel progresses. In the following passage, for example, Jade and Hinx jump or 'jink' from asteroid to asteroid, dimension to dimension:

I got off him and walked on that asteroid. Put my hands on my hips. Looked around. Nothing there. Jinked another asteroid way off. Nothing there. Overhead the stars were white freckles on a dark kisser, an ugly face unless you were a jak.
 "I'm gonna jink me that star over there," I said.
 "Ahoossss..."
 Jinked that star. Piddling little old thing. Jinked those planets. Eight poor dead hulks. Knew 'em by name, knew 'em down to their sterile atoms.⁶⁹

The mobility of language here corresponds with the mobility in the narrative.⁷⁰

Moreover, the casual literalness of Piserchia's descriptions of Jade's asteroid and star hopping helped me find a way to approach the sudden appearances of lel in *Earthship*, especially in the scene where the Epir fleet attack *Evander*. Lel simply appear in the walls, the air is simply changed, made solid: to make language participate with these changes, rather than explain them, is a deliberate way to organise narrative motion.

Language being insufficient to represent the figural directly, the solution I offer in *Earthship* is first to problematise attention, and then to develop an allegorical practice of writing that focuses on composing new language through, and in participation with, a historical genre vocabulary for representing the figural. For this novel, my vocabulary comes chiefly from the three texts outlined above, 'They Do Not Always Remember', *The Einstein Intersection*, and *Star Rider*. Poetic writing is the best solution I have for writing close to the figural in itself. As in poetry, science fiction's desire to speak of

⁶⁹ D Piserchia, p. 5.

⁷⁰ And, like Delany's narrative, Piserchia's seeks stability in relation to the Western: the rover with her horse searches for a mysterious treasure, but she is most concerned with doing justice, setting things right for those less fortunate or capable than she.

what is only faintly glimpsed, speculated, or seen only vaguely, as in dreams or visions, is a desire that compels an author to use allegorical language. And for me, as for Burroughs, insufficiency of language means that there is still always more that attention and writing might do, there are still other worlds, other words, other ways of speaking to be sought.

On allegory and poetic writing

Fredric Jameson notes that the hermeneutic model of ‘deeper meaning hidden within the text, behind, below the surface, like an “unconscious” of the text that needs to be interpreted out’ has become unpopular ‘in this age of surfaces and decentered, textualized consciousness.’⁷¹ He proposes allegory as another model, describing allegory as ‘a structure in which a more obscure train of thinking attaches itself parasitically to a second, an other (*allos/agoreuein*) line of figuration, through which it attempts to think its own, impossible, as yet only dimly figured thought.’⁷² There is a temporary stabilising influence at work here, which sustains motion rather than grounding or anchoring it. An effort of poetic attention which begins with attention and ends with poetic writing creates passages for further participatory encounters with the figural in motion. This is as close as language can bring us to the figural, to obscure, anexact yet rigorous thinking as it is being thought. The obscure, the figural, the speculative, is illuminated in a temporarily stable moment. Language is added while the moment lasts, and then it passes, the figural varies away, and language remains as a monument to the effort of attention, rather than the figural in itself.

⁷¹ F Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, p. 343.

⁷² *ibid.*

Jameson positions allegory as the solution to a problem of representation: allegory makes figural or structural totalities representable, and this is different from a relationship of concept mapping, where allegory is taken to mean ‘a one-on-one relationship—A stands for C and B stands for D’.⁷³ Adapting Jameson’s usage, allegory is a temporary solution in language to a failure of representation, while being itself, in formal terms, a failure of representation, a solution that always breaks down.⁷⁴ Jameson traces this failure of allegory to adequately represent to the problem of perfect representation: it is imagined that the particular and the universal can combine into a complete representation, but the universal does not exist (is not representable) and the particular has no existence without the universal.⁷⁵

The allegorical narrative move in science fiction is to situate the figurative in terms of the representational. At the level of language, this is also a move inherent in poetry. In *Earthship*, I allegorise the body to ‘embody’ lelks, an alien life form, who are the novum in relation to the human bodies whose pain and desires the novel represents more directly. By writing about the ways that lelks behave and move in relation to human bodies, I am able to write about the experience of a human body in pain, which is an experience that resists representational language. The experience of pain, especially chronic pain, is the experience of the repeated failure of language to represent pain. And, then, the repeated effort to express it, to move from the destruction of language toward the representation of the pain-body, is a creative act of language.

Allegory is inherent in science fiction as the genre’s way to write about the future in terms of the present, an unknown duration in terms of a known duration. In *Earthship* I allegorise the genetic inheritance of chronic pain by writing about the genetic

⁷³ F. Jameson, *Jameson on Jameson: Conversations on Cultural Marxism*, I. Buchanan (ed.), Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2007, p. 229.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p. 169.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

inheritance of an extraterrestrial circulatory system (Lasja and Satu's lys vessels) as well as the inheritance of certain obscure physical 'passages' which permit lelks to enter the body and circulate with lys. My proposition was that to write a narrative about genetically inherited pain would require me to reconstitute my perception of the narrative in terms of how it represents the lurching, wave-like, leaping movements of pain; and that I would need an attendant reconstitution of my approach to using language. This is a proposition well within the ambit of science fiction as a genre: I could rephrase this as proposing that the world-building work that is part of creating a science fiction narrative must be extended to creating the language to describe that world, which is a natural objective for a science fiction author. I further highlight pain as a thematic novum, as pain and lelks drive the narrative and the interactions between characters.

The science fiction narrative is world-building, while pain is world-destroying, and chronic pain in particular, which is a kind of imprisonment in pain. Satu's chronic pain, which she passes onto Lasja, is her genetic sentence. Pain is a threshold of language, and my stylistic choice is to enact Lasja's body opening up to the pain, and into lelks as a hybrid Earthling-lelk, in the language of the novel and the way it moves, rather than to foreground this narratively. In other words, to fold the experience of pain into the language of the novel, rather than to make the novel explicitly about Lasja and her mother Satu's experiences of pain. Consequently, *Earthship* itself, in its structure, the way it moves as a narrative, and its language patterns and vocabulary, becomes an allegory for the body in pain, lurching and occluding and violent and impassioned, paranoid and panicked, suddenly relaxed and suddenly tensed by ungovernable physical contortions. It is a body whose pain places it in life and death at the same time, allegorising the ununderstandable event of death.

A novel makes present for its reader a duration of events that have happened. Science fiction makes a speculative duration present, using language to alter perception to bring, for example, a future into the present, to represent figures of the imagination. I argue that poetry performs a similar function, but focuses on language rather than narrative. Henry Miller argues that a poet is not the maker of verses, but one who seeks to, and is capable of, ‘profoundly altering the world’.⁷⁶ Poetry has a world-building function at the level of language—‘Let the poet burst with his straining after unheard of and unnameable things!’ writes Miller.⁷⁷ The field of possibility for poetic writing is both language and the physical territory of the poem; language and the unscribed ‘white space’ on the page around it, for example.⁷⁸

I contend that to write poetically is not primarily to write figuratively, but to write representationally in clear consciousness of the crisis of representation; that is, the insufficiency whereby language can never perfectly represent what cannot be represented, what remains unthinkable and unspeakable. I propose that this is in sympathy with what science fiction does narratively and at the level of language. Alien, bizarre, unknown, incomprehensible symptoms of a future are represented in science fiction narratives, and the representation itself is the purpose. The elements do, however, resolve in relation to the novum. For example, in Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* the narrative resolves not around Deckard’s work in retiring the rogue replicants, but around the revelation that he too may be a replicant, and moreover around the semi-organic nature of replicants. In other words, Dick resolves the narrative around the open-ended question of when a body is human, how much humanity is necessary. Contrast this with the resolution of a detective novel, for

⁷⁶ H Miller, *The Time of the Assassins*, New Directions, New York, 1962, p. 38.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 20–21.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, p. 124: Miller quotes Wallace Fowle: ‘The poet exists not only in the words to which he signs his name, but he is also in the whiteness which remains on the page.’

example, about which we can say, in general, that either the crime is solved, or some kind of justice is done.⁷⁹

Poetry, I argue, is the effort to bring language as close as possible to what resists representation, what is still unspoken. Poetry is the effort to speak directly about the figural, in full consciousness of the insufficiency of this effort. Poetic writing has both a literal and allegorical function, each in sympathy with the other. While language is insufficient to represent the figural specifically or capture it in total, an event of poetic writing is an event of attentive participation that can stabilise and sustain allegorical correspondences between representation and what cannot be represented, opaque essences which remain estranged from language.

On the representation of anexact essences and corporealities

Philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari develop the useful concept of a ‘vague’ science, around the idea of the ‘anexact’ essence, which is ‘neither inexact like sensible things nor exact like ideal essences, but *anexact yet rigorous* (“essentially and not accidentally inexact”).⁸⁰ To illustrate, they contrast the fixed and ideal essence of the circle with the ‘vague and fluent’ essence of ‘roundness’: roundness an essence of the circle, but distinct from it, and similarly distinct from things that are round.⁸¹ All variations of an anexact essence, all its ‘transformations, distortions, ablations, and augmentations’⁸² will form vague yet rigorous material figures, which are transitory, in flow, in variation, never formed or formalised: ‘fuzzy aggregates’ whose corporeality *is*

⁷⁹ This is why the metaphysical or postmodern detective fiction, in which the crime is not only never solved but the investigation is a total failure, is a disturbing variation on the detective story. For example, Paul Auster’s *City of Glass*, in which an overabundance of clues that cannot be reconciled lead to the disintegration of both narrative and narrator/investigator. See P. Auster, *The New York Trilogy*, Faber and Faber, London, 1987.

⁸⁰ G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 367.

⁸¹ *ibid.*

⁸² *ibid.*

change, transformation, variation⁸³. The anexact is a varying corporeality, distinct from intelligible matter or matter that assumes a form, matter as some ‘thing’. Poet and translator Pierre Joris describes a poem in similar terms:

[A] poem is not only the one version printed in a book, but also all its other (possible) printed versions—context changing or adding to or subtracting from meaning—plus all the possible oral and/or visual performances, as well as the totality of translations it gives rise to. The printed poem is, in fact, only a score for all subsequent readings (private or public) and performative transformations, be they through music, dance, painting, or foreign-language translation.⁸⁴

To develop the ‘thingness’ of a poem in some way—to compose it, to publish it, to read it, to dance it—is to organise a representational encounter between the poem and materials. In this process, the poem is not only a language-material representation, but a re-representation of some ‘thingness’ perceived in anexact poetic sensations flowing in the poem. In saying this, I contend that, in science fiction and in poetry, the crisis of representation is not also a crisis of perception: The material of language is insufficient to fix the vague essence of perception, but perception is anexact and thus never fixed to material. To write poetically is to organise material encounters between anexact essences and fixed materials in relation to a perceived field of possibility. To write science fiction is a similar process, where the field of possibility is related to the megatext and to the narrative’s novum, from which a cognitive estrangement follows, a radical alienation that at the same time flows and varies out of the narrative and is sufficiently grounded in it.

⁸³ *ibid.*, p. 407.

⁸⁴ P Joris, ‘Introduction,’ in P Celan *Breathturn into Timestead: The Collected Later Poetry*, trans. P Joris, Electronic edition, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2014.

Even when the perceived anexact essence is directed into language, the result is not necessarily meaningless. In an essay on Nimrod's language in Dante's *Inferno*⁸⁵, Pierre Joris writes that Nimrod's punishment in Hell is the loss of language that communicates meaning, but not the loss of language entirely, nor a form of communication. Instead Nimrod rants in an ununderstandable tongue: "*Raphèl mai amècche zabì almi.*"⁸⁶ Are Nimrod's words meaningless? Joris demurs:

The words Dante puts into Nimrod's mouth are fitting, are accurate in their intention on language. Their meaning, in that sense, is absolutely clear: they mean to be ununderstandable, to be the babble of Babel, the language that is untranslatable into any language — & that therefore, we know, must be translated.⁸⁷

Joris proposes that Nimrod is either speaking in the unified language of Babel, or one of the post-Babel languages 'which are what makes translation possible.'⁸⁸ The ununderstandable activates the desire to make meaningful, to heap meaning around the word. We cannot translate Nimrod's communication, so for this function of representation in known language material it is insufficient, and yet it is not essentially meaningless in itself. It can be perceived, it can be read, but its corporeality is vague; it is anexact yet rigorous. I propose that the perception of anexactitude that a poem can carry with it, folded with language, is what makes poetic writing so compelling and useful for a science fiction writer. Faltering, stammering language, even words whose sounds point to something passing between perception and language, can be used to represent, if only temporarily, anexact corporealities.

A poem can be a test of language, probing what language can do, and probing with language into what is perceivable but unrepresentable. A poem is a temporary,

⁸⁵ P Joris, 'Nimrod in Hell' in *Permanent Diaspora*, Duration Press, 2002, <http://www.durationpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Joris-Pierre_Permanent-Diaspora.pdf>, Viewed 7 August 2017, pp. 23–25.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, p. 23.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

transitory solution to the crisis of representation. In view of the insufficiency of representation, the poem is a solution to the problem of how to speak anyway, how to add language to what inclines away from the word. In terms of creative effort, science fiction is *world*-building, and the problem is how to add language to speculative perception to bring the figural into cognitive sympathy with the representational in the context of narrative events. Poetry, similarly, can be thought of as *word*-building, that is, the addition of language material to bring the figural into cognitive sympathy with the representational in the context of a language event.

Heather McHugh and Nikolai Popov argue: ‘Everything in a poem is literal, that is, made of letters, blanks, and their interrelationships on the page, and the literal is everything.’⁸⁹ The novelist may be seen as primarily paying attention to narrative (including character and plot), while the poet is paying attention to language; yet the novelist is paying attention to language as well, to a different purpose, in the context of a different codification of communication, and the poet likewise pays attention to narrative and voice, but under the codes of poetry. Openness to anexactitude is in the essence of poetry, and representing real, anexact corporealities which have real effects in the world is a foundational purpose of poetic writing. ‘Poetry...does not represent a world of which it is a copy,’ writes Jon Clay, ‘it is itself a real part of the world...with its own forces and effects.’⁹⁰

In poetic writing the effort to represent the unrepresentable can be mistaken for opacity *qua* opacity, but opacity is a compositional and even a narrative essence in

⁸⁹ N Popov and H McHugh, ‘Preface’ in P Celan *Glottal Stop: 101 Poems by Paul Celan*, trans. N Popov and H McHugh, Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, Hanover, 2000, pp. xi–xiii.

⁹⁰ J Clay, *Sensation, Contemporary Poetry and Deleuze: Transformative Intensities*, Continuum, London, 2010, p. 7.

poetry and science fiction.⁹¹ Poet Caroline Bergvall perceives opacity in relation to desire, an active, propulsive, and participatory relationship:

Opacity as some sort of compositional as much as existential reality yields tough lessons about knowledge and applying one's skills. Tough lessons about investigation. ... Desire's opacity is the longing that gives the courage to depart, to set out. It lends the harshest sweetness to the most total risk. It is as opaque as it is luminous and precious.⁹²

Ezra Pound argues that modern poetry is 'essentially both foreign and opaque,'⁹³ writes Robert Stark; and Stark argues that opacity has a precisely physical quality of being 'a material obstruction to the transmission of light'—so that opacity in the positive means partial transmission.⁹⁴ It is the essence of poetry to represent opacity, to show how the anexact can be perceived literally: to write silences, to write the night, to fix frenzies in their flight, as Rimbaud put it.⁹⁵ Poetry, like science fiction, is open to in-between-ness, open to representations of what is passing between, but what is passing resists definition, resists clarity.

Jacques Plessen suggests that poetry should be 'viewed more as a code than as a system, and a code in the legal sense of the word: a collection of regulations with its legislators and lawyers.'⁹⁶ Codified or not, any particular use of language, Plessen argues:

will sociologically and anthropologically stand for another world, and a "poetic" use of language becomes a rite that accompanies, honors, and evokes this other world.⁹⁷

⁹¹ cf. Whether Deckard is or is not a replicant in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* See PK Dick, op. cit.; And consider too the ending of Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey*: Kubrick's representation of the unrepresentable, using opaque, oblique imagery, is complex and difficult to understand, perhaps even more difficult to explain, but science fiction is open to tests of the limits of languages. See S Kubrick, dir, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, MGM, Stanley Kubrick Productions, Beverly Hills, CA, 1968.

⁹² C Bergvall, *Drift*, Nightboat Books, Brooklyn and Callicoon, 2014, p. 149.

⁹³ R Stark, *Ezra Pound's Early Verse and Lyric Tradition: A Jargonist's Apprenticeship*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2012, p. 58.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 58–59.

⁹⁵ A Rimbaud, *A Season in Hell/Une saison en enfer & The Drunken Boat/Le bateau ivre*, trans. L Varèse, New Directions, New York, 2011, p. 51.

⁹⁶ J Plessen 'The Tribulations of the Alexandrine in the Work of Rimbaud: A Contest Between Innovation and Convention' in *Convention and Innovation in Literature* T d'Haen, RG Grübel, H Lethen eds, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 1989, p. 253.

⁹⁷ *ibid.* p. 255.

The poet's memory of the other world is of the past as well as the future, argues Jerzy Peterkiewicz, and both functions, recollection and divination—representation and figuration—‘come from a memory without chronology which is poetry's own memory.’⁹⁸ I contend, with Peterkiewicz, that the ideal for poetry is direct communication, direct representation, which offers the reader participation in the lived experience of the author, the reader being situated in this experience primarily through language.⁹⁹ As representation reaches its limit, an unchronological allegory of chronology remains present in the poem, and the poem offers this for the reader's participation. It is in the language, between the lines, and in the unscribed space around the poem. It is between the poem and patterns of intensities in the field of sensations with which the poem is in correspondence. It is an opaque but temporarily stabilising allegory for a chronology: ‘Poems are our children,’ writes Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva. ‘Our children are older than us, because they have longer and further to live. Older than us from the future. Therefore sometimes foreign to us.’¹⁰⁰

On choosing to examine poems by Paul Celan and T.S. Eliot

My critical thinking in this dissertation is directed at developing an allegorical practice of writing for my novels in the science fiction genre. Underlying this thinking is my contention that the essential problem of representation in science fiction and poetry is the same at the level of language. Both forms of writing inscribe the figural, the alien body estranged from language. Both forms of writing foreground the practice of representing the figural as literal. There is an intuitive focus on the transitory character

⁹⁸ J Peterkiewicz, p. 20.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 23, 43.

¹⁰⁰ M Tsvetaeva, ‘The Poet and Time’ in *Art in the Light of Consciousness*, trans. A Livingstone, Bloodaxe Books, Highgreen, 2010, p. 96.

of poetic writing, that it holds open a passage for encountering the figural, but temporarily, opaquely. Shadows of the figural pass beneath language in the poems of Paul Celan and T.S. Eliot. For these authors, allegorical language temporarily stabilises perception of the estranged, the ungraspable or unspeakable, by rendering it literal in a variable and limited duration. Language maps the author's intimate encounter with the figural, mapping a field of possibility for the unspeakable to move into sympathy with language.

Language gives material form to a duration of poetic attention to what is alien in itself, and therefore remains estranged from representation. The languaged poem extends an offer to readers, listeners, audience, translators, performers, to participate in the author's original encounter with the figural. The contention that allegory stabilises literal representation of the figural does not mean language can permanently hold open a passage to the figural in itself. Language fails. It cannot keep the opaque clear, yet the very attempt to speak the opaque, the obscure, the estranged, shows the purpose of poetic writing: In the face of language's insufficiency and seeming indifference, as art critic and poet John Berger argues, 'Poetry addresses language in such a way as to close this indifference and to incite a caring.'¹⁰¹ The effort of poetic attention which culminates in an event of poetic writing communicates something vitally human about the meaning to be found in opacity. Berger argues that poetic writing turns on intimacy, closeness, what I construe as attention and participation:

Poetry makes language care because it renders everything intimate. This intimacy is the result of the poem's labor, the result of the bringing-together-into-intimacy of every act and noun and event and perspective to which the poem refers.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ J Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*, Vintage International, 1991, p. 95.

¹⁰² *ibid.*, p. 97.

A successful poem uses language to enfold the knowable with the opaque in a limited duration which is transitory but stable enough to sustain repeated encounters with the author's original effort of attention to a figural body, a body of sensations. I contend that at the level of language the science fiction novel makes the same effort as the poem. The science fiction author uses allegorical writing to reach after the figural, to bring it closer, to join the figural to language as best they can. This is the uniting effort of poetic writing, Berger argues:

Apart from reassembling by metaphor, poetry unites by its *reach*. It equates the reach of a feeling with the reach of the universe; after a certain point the type of extremity involved becomes unimportant and all that matters is degree; by their degree alone extremities are joined.¹⁰³

For both Paul Celan and T.S. Eliot, I argue, the poem is first an attentive reaching after the figural, then a participatory response to the figural, an effort to make a map in language of allegorical correspondences with the figural. The poem addresses language to bring it, by varying degrees and in varying durations, closer to the figural, to the opaque encounter: 'Every authentic poem contributes to the labor or poetry,' Berger contends: '...Poetry can repair no loss, but it defies the space which separates.'¹⁰⁴

Paul Celan's personal history is particularly important to how his poetics developed. Born in 1920 in Czernowitz, in the Kingdom of Bukovina, Romania (now Chernivtsi, Ukraine), survived the Holocaust and the later Soviet occupation, while his parents died in labour camps. Celan was imprisoned in a labour camp from 1942 until the end of the Second World War, after which he fled the Bukovina region for Vienna, before relocating to Paris.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, p. 96.

Celan's mother had made German the language of his childhood home, and after the war he chose this, the language of his parents' murderers, to write in.¹⁰⁵ But the model of poetry to which Celan submitted was a way to reconstitute a poetic language within German, and to test its capacity to endure his fractured human psyche,¹⁰⁶ making language participate in and speak directly for the unspeakable experiences both *of* the Holocaust and *of surviving* it.¹⁰⁷

Celan's poems map routes from self to Other; from silence to speaking; from obscurity to perception. Careful attention to duration was essential to his poetic perception, giving a strange temporal stability even to poems which are stunningly fractured expressions of pain. Celan's language insists on participation, but the poems, in the way they move, show me how to pay attention to them, how to join them in their motion.

Folding the knowable with the obscure using language, in a duration of experience described by the form of a poem, is different from making a juxtaposition in language between what is knowable and what is obscure. More intimate and physical than a juxtaposition, Celan's poems fold the knowable and the obscure into a vector of poetic motion. That the poem has motion with which we can participate, navigating, so to speak, by the signs of words, is an important perceptual point for me. Poems are, Celan argues,

routes ... among many other routes, routes on which language becomes voice, they are encounters, routes of a voice to a perceiving you, creaturely routes, blueprints for being perhaps, a sending oneself ahead toward oneself, in search of oneself ... A kind of homecoming.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ C Caryl, 'Political Animal' in *Foreign Policy*, April 17, 2015, <<http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/04/17/political-animal-gunter-grass/>>, Viewed 10 August 2017.

¹⁰⁶ In a letter to Ilana Shmueli, Celan wrote: 'the doctors have much to answer for, every day is a burden, what you call "my own health" is probably never to be, the damage reaches to the core of my existence. ... They've healed me to pieces!' (*Man hat mich zerheilt*). J Felstiner *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1995, p. 330, n.36.

¹⁰⁷ Celan's early life is the subject of Israel Chalfen's biography *Paul Celan: A Biography of his Youth*, trans. M Bleyleben, Persea Books, New York, 1991.

¹⁰⁸ P Celan, *The Meridian: Final Version—Drafts—Materials*, B Böschstein, H Schmult, M Schwarzkopf and C Wittkop (eds), trans. P Joris, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2011, p. 11.

For Celan's poems, 'being' is at best transitory, and it carries, importantly, a sense of motion, of 'becoming', and change, variation, as well as the sense of turning at, and upon, a threshold. Thus, 'homecoming' is the becoming-home turn upon a threshold framed by the poem. The poem is temporarily held on the threshold in its participation with an estranged Other.

John Felstiner notes that Martin Buber and Martin Heidegger, and indeed meeting Heidegger¹⁰⁹, were notable provocations for Celan in respect of his idea of Being. Buber's *I and Thou*¹¹⁰ 'made "Thou" the greeting between human spirits,' writes Felstiner, leading Celan to say that poetry gropes its way onward, toward an 'addressable Thou' and an 'addressable reality': the two aims are fused into a unified motion for poetry, to address Thou and reality at once.¹¹¹ The reachable, stabilising material for such motion is language. Language is used as a way to orient the self, to chart reality, and language is also movement, 'something happening,' in Celan's words, something 'being *en route*, an attempt to find a direction.'¹¹² And the work of the poet is to participate with that movement, to 'carry their existence into language, racked by reality and in search of it.'¹¹³ Felstiner argues that this is an important philosophical position taken in relation to Heidegger's philosophy of Being, *Dasein*, but Celan takes language further than Heidegger, through catastrophe, through consciousness of the failure of language and its insufficiency, nonetheless continuing with language in search of the very reality that has wounded it.¹¹⁴ The problem of Heidegger's active involvement in the Nazi party, and the facts of the Holocaust, remained all but

¹⁰⁹ The poem Celan wrote about this meeting is 'Todtnauberg'. See P Celan *Selected Poems*, trans. M Hamburger, Penguin Books, London, 1996, p. 300–301.

¹¹⁰ M Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. RG Smith, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1937.

¹¹¹ J Felstiner, p. 116.

¹¹² P Celan *Collected Prose*, trans. R Waldrop, Carcanet, Manchester, 1986, p. 34.

¹¹³ *ibid.*, p. 35.

¹¹⁴ J Felstiner, pp. 116–117.

unaddressed by the philosopher.¹¹⁵ But Heidegger was concerned with thought, language, and reality, and had written substantively on poetry, and Celan knew his work.¹¹⁶ Heidegger argues that things are afforded Being, they are unconcealed in certain relationships, to become what they are through apt adaptation (*Ereignis*),¹¹⁷ and there is an essential tension in this ‘becoming’ adaptation which is also in Celan’s poetry. Yet, Heidegger tended to ground Being, arguing that things show themselves as what they truly are when we have certainty of their representation, when we can master their representation. This implies a view of art as unconcealing a world, showing what is there, in a causal relationship.¹¹⁸ However, while Heidegger locates language as the house of Being, he also argues that ‘what we reach is by constantly going through this house.’¹¹⁹ It is the going-through, being *en route*, and the participation with language in a conversation with the unspoken, unreached Other, that Celan foregrounds in his poetry. And it is upon the threshold, rather than within the house, that Celan’s poetic philosophy is to be found, a threshold between language and silence, between the word that can be spoken, and what remains unspoken.

But the house is not a home, for Celan, nor for Eliot. There is no finality to the poetic effort. ‘Home is where one starts from,’ writes Eliot.¹²⁰ A poem sets out from language toward language, but its movement is always through a passage, ‘from threshold to threshold’ in Celan’s words.¹²¹ The poem sets out along the routes of the poet’s attention, temporarily stable and sustained in this participatory mode. ‘*Heimat* [home] is an untranslatable word,’ Celan stressed. ‘And does the concept even exist?’

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 116.

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 245: ‘I knew everything of his.’

¹¹⁷ M Wrathall, *Later Heidegger*, (Personal lecture notes), Melbourne School of Continental Philosophy, Melbourne, 2013.

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹¹⁹ M Heidegger, ‘What Are Poets For?’ in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A Hofstadter, HarperCollins, New York, 1971, p. 129.

¹²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 19.

¹²¹ P Celan, *From Threshold to Threshold*, trans. D Young, Marick Press, Grosse Point Farms, 2010.

It's a human fabrication, an illusion.'¹²² Thus there is no returning home, there is no end to the route; the path always diverges and the only conclusion to the poet's effort of representation is silence, or death. For silence we have Rimbaud's model, the poet who reports as literally as possible of his raids on the inarticulate, but pushes his perception to a threshold with silence. Importantly, I argue, it was Rimbaud himself who gave up language or reached the limit of what he felt he could say; he exhausted his desire to speak. It was not that he exhausted the unknown. Language, and what remains unspoken, surpassed him, just as 'exactly insofar as, by writing [*A Season in Hell* and *Illuminations*], Rimbaud touched the extreme, he also surpassed the order of communicable things, and the unknown did not come closer to us.'¹²³ But poetry, and specifically, for me, Celan's poems and Eliot's *Four Quartets*, do provide a continuation of the poetic desire to represent the unknown using language. Celan re-situates poetry at the threshold between representation and silence, conscious of its insufficiency, but seeking, anyway, after the 'addressable Thou' and the 'addressable reality'. Eliot shows me toward a plainer sense of the work of poetic writing, that it is in the striving itself, the effort of attentive participation: 'There is only the fight to recover what has been lost / And found and lost again and again [...] But perhaps neither gain nor loss. For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.'¹²⁴

¹²² M Perloff, *Edge of Irony: Modernism in the Shadow of the Habsburg Empire*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2016, p. 125.

¹²³ M Blanchot, 'The Sleep of Rimbaud' in *The Work of Fire*, trans. C Mandell, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1995, p. 156.

¹²⁴ Eliot, p. 19.

Chapter One

The stabilising influence of poetic writing and the poem's uninscribed page

Overview

In this chapter I explore poetic attention as an allegorical practice of writing, oriented toward utilising poetic writing in science fiction novels. I seek to situate this as a process operating primarily at the level of language. My objective is to elaborate poetic attention as a strategy for perceiving and working toward poetic writing. Proposing both literally and allegorically that a poem is a body in correspondent motion with an anexact body of sensations, I experiment with modifying poems by Paul Celan, in order to examine how poetic writing ‘moves’ on a page, relative to the anexact corporealities with whose motion it participates. I argue that poetic writing is the actualisation, with language as material, of differentiated motion from a body of sensations. I refer to the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari on sensations in *What is Philosophy?*, and I refer to my novel *Earthship* to situate this chapter in relation to my creative work.

My broader purpose in developing poetic attention as an allegorical model is to create a perceptual scaffolding for how my novels function at the level of language. I see this as a way of stabilising my writing style, by way of stabilising how I represent the figural. The purpose of poetic writing, in my novelistic usage, is to use language as

a route to experience of the figural, in the context of the allegorical writing practice necessary for writing science fiction. Poetic attention and poetic writing are thus ways to think about the key problem of science fiction writing, which is how to represent the alien, the figural, speculative Other.

On the stabilising influence of poetic writing, focusing on Paul Celan

The Celanian poem, belonging not to what is spoken but to the effort to speak, and not to the revealed but the effort to pay attention, to perceive, is a stammering, groping, becoming-speech, existing on a threshold which always opens onto another threshold. To make a poem on the threshold between speaking and silence is temporarily to inhabit the threshold, to speak with both voices; language resists and threatens to break, but the poet's intuitive attention and participation keeps it in motion. Stability is key, and poetic attention, I argue, stabilises language in the duration of the poem; or, in relation to *Earthship*, within the duration of the narrative.

I examine poetry in this thesis, specifically Celan's and Eliot's, because these are starker, more direct events of language, for me, than a novel. Eliot writes of his aim toward language which offers its representations of the figural to be read above all literally:

to write poetry which should be essentially poetry, with nothing poetic about it, poetry standing naked in its bare bones, or poetry so transparent that we should not see the poetry, but that which we are meant to see through the poetry, poetry so transparent that in reading it we are intent on what the poem *points at*, and not only the poetry...¹

Poetic writing strives to make a route toward encounters with anexact yet rigorous essences or corporealities, perceived at frontiers of experience, at thresholds of

¹ C Ricks and J McCue (eds), *The Poems of T. S. Eliot Vol I: Collected and Uncollected Poems*, Faber and Faber, London, 2015, p. 894.

speaking and silence: ‘And so each venture / Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate’, Eliot writes.² My practical problem of how to create an allegorical practice of writing, at the level of language, is the same as the poetic problem of how to speak about what is almost silent, or figural, or unspeakable, how to write representationally about the wholly Other.

Poetic motion, perceived by paying attention to the passages between the addressable Other and an addressable reality or world, is what I seek in reading and analysing Celan and Eliot. In relation to my work writing science fiction, to read after passages in which language speaks toward, or on behalf of, the alien Other, is both linguistically and narratively compelling. To write about the alien is science fiction’s narrative purview; to write *with* the alien, mapping language for its motion, or to write from *within* the alien, as Celan’s poetry does, is a captivating prospect. I perceive this as the problem of writing the alien lel in *Earthship*: I need to write from within the events of contact between lel and other bodies.

Celan’s poetry participates in the problem of how to situate the wounded authorial body, a body in pain, and how to speak with it.³ For me, as a science fiction writer, closely reading the desire of Celan’s poems for speech is as instructive as what they may say, or struggle to say, or fail to say: the compositional problem both poetry and science fiction face is how to represent to what remains unspoken. The Brazilian author Clarice Lispector described the writer’s stammering struggle as seeking after ‘The secret harmony of disharmony: I don’t mean something already made, but something still being torturously made.’⁴

² TS Eliot, *Four Quartets*, Faber and Faber, London, 2001, p. 19.

³ ‘Give in when outnumbered, but as prisoner speak in an understandable language,’ wrote Celan. See: P Joris and L Schwartz, *Cross Cultural Poetics*, Episode 259, <<http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Joris.php>>, viewed 13 August 2017.

⁴ C Lispector, *Água Viva*, p. 6.

One objective of my model of poetic attention is to productively perceive poetic writing as disharmonious, insufficient, unfinished, and still becoming, still in motion. Poetic attention is a way to organise participatory encounters with patterns of intensities in anexact bodies of sensations; and poetic writing, language material added to these patterns, forms routes, however fragmentary, for readers to encounter what passes between those patterns and language. And it is *attention*, John Felstiner argues, which activates Celan's poems.⁵ As language fails, proving insufficient to represent anexactitude, poetic attention activates and makes possible further poetic writing.

Another important reason I chose Celan and Eliot is that their poetic attention is attuned to a longer duration of speaking. In order to develop a model for my writing I want to learn from writers who have sought to speak with the way things change over time. In proposing this, I am directed by Blanchot's argument that all of Rimbaud's texts 'signify the same superior aridity, the need to say everything in the time of a bolt of lightning, foreign to the faculty of saying that needs duration.'⁶ I read Celan's poetry as a resumption of poetic attention at the moment of language having escaped Rimbaud: '*I can no longer speak!*' wrote Rimbaud, before taking on the task of staying silent.⁷ On the daunting threshold between speech and silence, poem and poet converse and make a pattern for participation. Celan stressed that such a conversation was both in terms of language and the perception of an alien creatureliness of the poem:

I speak, as I am allowed to speak of poems, on my own behalf. Whereby, and that, it seems to me, seems to belong to the poem's hopes since always, I perhaps also speak on behalf of an alien,—who knows, perhaps even of a totally alien matter. ... —the poem tarries or rather tests the wind—a word related to the creaturely—through such thoughts.⁸

⁵ J Felstiner, p. xvii.

⁶ M Blanchot, p. 160.

⁷ '*Je ne sais plus parler!*': A Rimbaud, *A Season in Hell*, pp. 80–81; Celan was a notable translator and produced a German translation of Rimbaud's 'Le Bateau Ivre' which remains in print: A Rimbaud, *Le Bateau ivre* / *Das Trunkene Schiff*, trans. P Celan, Insel Verlag, Frankfurt a.M. and Leipzig, 2008.

⁸ P Celan, *The Meridian*, p. 55.

The poem ‘hopes’ and ‘tarries’, the poem tests language; language is insufficient to represent the poem, yet the poet makes the effort, representing patterns of intensities in language, in its duration.

Celan’s poems model for me the robust representation of extreme ambiguity over variable durations; and they model obscure but direct and literal representation of the ambiguous and figural, in an essentially participatory mode. His repetition, throughout his oeuvre, of words related to the body or to stable things in the world, for example, eye, mouth, blood, heart; stone, snow, flowers, candle, and the address of the poems to ‘you’ from ‘I’, both varying, function to bring the poems into a stable participation with the human body.⁹ The poems’ language swerves and contorts and resists the reader’s mastery, splits and forks from line to line and within lines, but instead of mastery, participation is freely invited, as in a conversation between bodies. I argue that Celan’s poems are written in their motion in bodies, against bodies, across bodies. Intensely private, they offer themselves to Others, to eyes, mouths, blood, heart. In the following poem ‘Double Shape’, language offers a route to participation in a bodily encounter that resists language:

Let your eye in the chamber be a candle,
your gaze a wick,
let me be blind enough
to light it.

No.
Let something else be.

Step outside your house,
put a harness on your piebald dream,
let its hooves speak out
to the snow that you blew
off my soul’s ridge.¹⁰

⁹ D Young, ‘Introduction’ in Celan *From Threshold to Threshold*, trans. D Young, Marick Press, Grosse Point Farms, 2010, pp. xv–xvi.

¹⁰ P Celan, *From Threshold to Threshold*, p. 21.

What I hope to learn from Celan is how to speak literally about the figural, a skill which is of estimable benefit for me in writing science fiction, for representing the estranged, the alien. Reading 'Double Shape,' I let the poem speak to me directly, privately, literally, body to body. I take its metaphors literally to see what will happen in my body: I let my eye be the candle illuminating the poem, my gaze, my attention, the wick-length of illumination. I have the experience of being prepared to receive something, or serving the vision of another. But the second stanza stops me. 'No. / Let something else be.' It is a soft, commanding turn: 'No' alone on its line, a sudden breath, a sharpening of attention, is followed by another command, unspecific—let *what* else be? On the page, these lines swell to fill the unprinted space around them. I do not feel admonished, I do not feel that the poem is withholding an answer to me, but I am brought to attention, made aware of my body and the poem's body, and of some desire to have me make another shape with it. And then comes a command that draws language away from common images (eye, chamber, candle, wick), and makes me pay attention in a different way. I recall the word I saw, but could not relate to: 'blind', 'let me be blind enough', and I come to understand that I am setting out on the poem's route, described by 'blind enough'. What is enough blindness to cast light over the poem's route? Perhaps both a quantity of blindness and a duration of it, and the blindness, too, which would attune my other senses to what is on the route: To the sound of the hooves of fractured dreams, to the distant sight of a soul's naked ridge, to the stranger light that shows the path revealed as I participate with the poem in itself.

The above analysis is an allegorical reading conducted with a process of poetic attention that I divide into four steps: I pay attention to the poem as a body in itself and to the way it seems to be moving; I encounter the poem in its motion; I participate with the poem in its motion along its routes; and I compose an event of language that is my

part of an ongoing conversation with the poem. Celan's approach to reading poetry is instructive for me. In a 1962 letter to poet René Char, he writes:

You see, I have always tried to *understand* you, to *respond* to you, to take your work like one takes a hand; ... To that in your work which did not—or not yet—open up to my comprehension, I responded with respect and by waiting ...¹¹

My allegorical reading is focussed on participation with the poem, taking a critical view so as to understand first how the poem is becoming-poem, how it is 'poeming', how it makes a passage between what is speakable and what is unspeakable. With poetic attention I seek to explore how a poem is becoming-poem, and then how it makes meaning in spite of the representational insufficiency of language.

'With a Variable Key' shows once again the conversation between powerful, physical imagery of the body and the poem as a guide along routes across thresholds between language and silence:

With a variable key
you unlock the house in which
drifts the snow of that left unspoken.
Always what key you choose
depends on the blood that spurts
from your eye or your mouth or your ear.

You vary the key, you vary the word
that is free to drift with the flakes.
What snowball will form round the word
depends on the wind that rebuffs you.¹²

Celan's formal patterns allegorise the folding of figural language around representational stability in firm concepts. Key, house, snow, blood, eye, mouth, ear, all situate the poem in physical experience. The poem itself is a folding between a stable stanza and an obscure and relatively unstable one, with the limit of the second stanza conditional on the same pattern in the image of 'the wind that rebuffs', the obscurely

¹¹ P Celan, *Selections*, ed. P Joris, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2005, p. 184.

¹² P Celan, *Selected Poems*, p. 91.

personified wind. Read literally, the poem nonetheless still offers a route, here through an essentially ambiguous conditional proposal: The key that keeps on changing, perhaps in response to a changing lock, is the stabilising image of the first stanza; i.e. the poem proposes stability in essential variation.

In observing that the variable blood of the body is what determines the availability of a key, the poem expresses that the ‘rule’ of access to language is the eruption of the inside into the outside. Even this is not access to sufficient language, only to words temporarily ‘free to drift’ with the uncontrollable flakes of what is unspoken (and unspeakable). The poem offers itself as guide to extreme and barely controllable variation: The key changes, the snow drifts, the blood spurts; yet, the key varies in relation to ‘your’ blood, in relation to ‘your’ body, so access to what is unspoken is not imposed on the body from outside. The outside, ‘the wind that rebuffs you’, is a force of resistance, and it muffles the word with snow, silencing it, stopping it from moving freely among silence; yet, the resistance of the unspoken to language does not preclude it from being spoken. Thus, I am able to read the poem’s figural structure as a pattern to a fold that Celan has made, a fold between a warning of the tremendous physical labour and risk and difficulty of approaching the unspoken on the threshold with silence; and a strange poetic assurance that as long as the body exists, the body in pain, it has access to language among what remains unspoken.

David Young, poet and Celan translator, argues against reading Celan too allegorically, in the sense of readily transferring ‘signifier to signified, e.g. snow = Shoa’ which ‘oversimplifies this poet’s technique.’¹³ There is a temptation toward hermeneutic overreach because of the appearance of opacity in Celan’s language. But, as I have shown in my surface readings above, that opacity is far from unremitting. The

¹³ D Young, in Celan *From Threshold to Threshold*, p. xvi.

poems on their language surfaces are readily encountered, and reward participation.

Young favours reading Celan in the manner of the poet writing the poem, to participate in the poem becoming-poem. He advocates reading ‘first on the literal level with Celan, feeling our way forward just as he did, with less assurance and more openness than allegorizing requires.’¹⁴ Yet, I argue, it is useful to keep an allegorical sensibility close, for what is spoken in Celan’s poems soon reveals what is unspoken; language forms a passage between the spoken and unspoken, between the body and the words on a threshold with silence:

I CAN STILL SEE YOU: an echo
that can be groped toward with antenna
words, on the ridge of
parting.

Your face quietly shies
when suddenly
there is lamplike brightness
inside me, just at the point
where most painfully one says, never.¹⁵

Seeing echoes, perceiving sensations, the poet gropes toward them with language, word by word. Adding language, the poet describes the motion of patterns of intensities perceived in a field of possibilities, which is generated by the movement of an opaque, anexact yet rigorous, body of sensations.

Developing poetic attention as a practice

‘Poems are not first of all written records, ... they are gifts to the attentive,’ writes Paul Celan.¹⁶ In extending this assertion to a practice of writing, I argue that poetic attention is a process of organising intuitive encounters with patterns perceived in poetic

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ P Celan, *Selected Poems*, p. 306–307.

¹⁶ P Celan, *The Meridian*, p. 63.

sensations, in order to participate in the motion of these patterns, and then to add language to them in events of poetic writing.

Poetic attention is also informed by a reading of the work of French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who characterise sensations and blocs of sensations, which I refer to as ‘bodies of sensations’, as independent beings in themselves. A bloc of sensations is a compound or monument of ‘percepts and affects’¹⁷—‘a bloc of present sensations that owe their preservation only to themselves.’¹⁸ This is a monument in the sense of the poet Horace, *Exegi monumentum aere perennius*:

I have achieved a monument more lasting
than bronze, and loftier than the pyramids of kings,
which neither gnawing rain nor blustering wind
may destroy, nor innumerable series of years,
nor the passage of ages....¹⁹

Horace’s poems are independent beings that stand up by themselves, as a monument of bronze or a pyramid is independent and free-standing. The independent being-in-itself of a bloc or body of sensations, and the percepts and affects with which it is composed, create the ideas of the body’s existence. Deleuze and Guattari argue:

Percepts are no longer perceptions; they are independent of a state of those who experience them. Affects are no longer feelings or affections; they go beyond the strength of those who undergo them. Sensations, percepts, and affects are *beings* whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived. They could be said to exist in the absence of man because man, as he is caught in stone, on the canvas, or by words, is himself a compound of percepts and affects.²⁰

A poem takes ‘the route of language to itself, its becoming visible and mortal,’ writes Celan: ‘whereby the poem becomes the *raison d’être* of language.’²¹ Language is the material by which latent change, latent mobilities in the poem, become actual. But

¹⁷ G Deleuze and F Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* trans. H Tomlinson and G Burchill, Verso, London, 1994, p. 164.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 167.

¹⁹ Horace, *The Complete Odes and Epodes with the Centennial Hymn*, trans. WG Shepherd, Penguin Books, London, 1983, p. 164.

²⁰ G Deleuze and F Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 164.

²¹ P Celan, *The Meridian*, p. 77.

it is not the material that is preserved, Deleuze and Guattari argue, but the percept or affect in itself, the body of sensations. The body perseveres in its striving after encounters, while the written poem is the recorded event of a transitory encounter between a body of sensations and language. Poetic writing is acutely transitory. A poem is a monument foremost to its own presence in its moment of becoming-actual in relation to language. Deleuze and Guattari lend support to this, arguing that ‘the monument is not something commemorating a past, it is a bloc of present sensations that owe their preservation only to themselves...’²²

The way Paul Celan conceives of the relationship of an author and a poem underpins this idea. Celan writes: ‘The poem is lonely. It is lonely and *en route*. Its author remains added to it.’²³ Poetic attention involves a transitory, intuitive, incomplete perception of *some* of the ways sensations, percepts, and affects move in relation to one another. In the first instance, this movement generates a field of possibility, whose internal consistency has a stabilising influence on attention. The field of possibility makes available a participatory way of using language, in the form of poetic writing. Poetic writing can be perceived as a language event which makes possible the actualisation of the anexact through its representation of patterns of intensities in relations between sensations. The patterns of intensities are routes to participation with sensations in their relations with one another.

Celan’s sense of speaking on behalf of a ‘totally alien matter’ suggests that the poem is already estranged, already Other.²⁴ The poem is a body in itself, in a pre-actualised, pre-material field of possibility.²⁵ The poem does not need language, but language

²² G Deleuze and F Guattari, op. cit., pp. 167–168.

²³ ‘Das Gedicht ist einsam. Es ist einsam und unterwegs. Wer es schreibt, bleibt ihm mitgegeben.’ I use Pierre Joris’s translation in P Celan, *The Meridian*, p. 9.

²⁴ P Celan, *The Meridian*, p. 55.

²⁵ J Clay, p. 7: ‘Poetry... is itself a real part of the world...with its own forces and effects.’

increases its capacity for new encounters. Allegorical representation being variable and transitory, it does not render a singular or ideal form for the figural. Allegorical representation opens up routes for further participatory encounters, rather than fixing or storing meaning in language. Poetic writing offers directions, rather than issuing directives.

Textually, stabilisation at the level of language occurs in terms of, for example, mood, shades of sense and correspondence between words, rhythms of language, and phonographic relationships between and within words. Poetic writing resists capturing sensations in deterministic events of language, favouring a participatory relationship between sensations and language. Poetic writing resists, for example, opinion²⁶ and instruction, which turn the routes of meaning into one-way lines, impose external codes, and mute allegory; and cliché, which is to restate what has been written before²⁷, and so does not capture the essential variability of sensations in their field of possibility.

Poetic writing describes manifold expressions, communications, conversations, translations, performances, and patterns in bodies of sensations. For the sake of developing poetic attention as a method directed toward writing, I propose to organise a process of poetic attention in four steps: Attention, encounter, participation, and event, where the event is composition in the material of language.

The process begins with intuitive attention, by which an encounter with a body of sensations is sought. In his essay *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, philosopher Henri Bergson argues that reality is persistently fluid and variable, and can only adequately

²⁶ G Deleuze and F Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 204: 'This is to say that artists struggle less against chaos (that, in a certain manner, all their wishes summon forth) than against the "clichés" of opinion.'

²⁷ C Ricks and J McCue (eds), p. 954: To Geoffrey Faber, T.S. Eliot writes, 'To "discover" has always been the word for me, rather than to "invent"; to reveal or release something which is in a sense already "there"; and to do something new, however small, not for the sake of novelty, but because the other things have already been done perfectly and there is no point in repetition.'

be understood by an intuitive method which seeks to grasp the movement of a thing from within it.²⁸ With intuitive efforts to encounter things in motion in this way, attention is paid to what is passing between the observer and the thing, more than what the thing is. ‘This reality is mobility,’ Bergson argues. ‘Not *things* made, but things in the making, not self-maintaining *states*, but only changing states, exist.’²⁹ Next, efforts of sympathetic, participatory encounter condition knowledge about the body of sensations, permitting the perception of patterns in sensations. Following stabilising patterns, language is then added to patterns in events of actualisation. Thus poetic attention is the four-part process of attention, encounter, participation, and event.

In conceiving of poetic attention in this way, as an allegorical practice of writing, I describe the writing event as the actualisation, in language, of *some* mobilities of poetic sensations. The caveat ‘some’ is important, and indicates that the poem in language represents a temporary pattern of intensities in a body of sensations. The pattern is vague, but consistent in relation to the field of possibility in which it generates. It is opaque and resists being represented as a way to ascribe definitive meaning to it, but the opacity is the essence of the pattern and not resistant *per se*. The opaque pattern of intensities participates with language for the sake of passage toward further encounters in the world. ‘The poem wants to head toward some other,’ Celan argues, ‘it needs this other, it needs an opposite. It seeks it out, it bespeaks itself to it.’³⁰ This sense of a poem being always poeming, always becoming-poem, is at the heart of poetic attention. Thus, an event of poetic writing can be thought of as the practice of mapping language to temporarily stable patterns of intensities in a body of sensations, so as to generate an allegorical relationship between representation, in language, and figural or anexact

²⁸ H Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. TE Hulme, GP Putnam’s Sons, New York and London, 1912, <<https://archive.org/details/anintroduction00berggoog>>, Viewed 4 March 2017, pp. 4–7.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 65.

³⁰ P Celan, *The Meridian*, p. 9.

sensations. In writing science fiction, this allegorical stability at the level of language participates with the allegorical stability that the novum gives the narrative.

In a science fiction narrative, a readerly pleasure gained from poetic writing is the pleasure of being present with language patterning to perceptions of the figural, of alien or speculative sensations. Put another way, this is the pleasure of being in the moment of allegorical correspondence between the literal and the figurative, experiencing the mapping of routes to the alien. In *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*, Samuel R. Delany writes of the experience of leaving a world at dawn through the lens of a poetics of alien identity that Delany has cultivated throughout the novel both narratively and linguistically:

To leave one part of a world in order to visit another is to indulge in a transformation of signs, their appearances, their meanings, that, however violent, still, because of the coherence of the transformative system itself, partakes of a logic, a purely geographical order, if not the more entailed connections lent by ecological or social factors: here they do it one way, there they do it another—with no doubt as to the identity of the antecedents of both “its.” But to leave a world, and to leave it at dawn, thus delaying all possibility of what one might learn in a day, is to experience precisely the problematics of that identity at its most intense: to see that identity shatter, fragment, and to realize that its solidity was always an illusion, and that infinite spaces between those referential shards are more opaque to direct human apprehension than all the star-flooded vacuum.³¹

Delany’s language here represents an alien experience, ‘leaving a world at dawn’, and builds, allegorically, ‘a rich tissue of correspondences’, to employ Deleuze and Guattari’s eloquent metaphor, between concepts, anexact essences, and functional states of being in the world.³² In terms of form, Delany’s long, diverging, turning sentences, which insist on the reader’s attention and stretch attention out, allegorise relationships between transformation and opacity, and transformation and violence,

³¹ SR Delany, *Stars in My Pocket*, pp. 337–338.

³² G Deleuze and F Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 199.

which are developed throughout the novel. On one world, transit from one part of that world to another part is an experience stabilised in systematic codifications concerning departure and arrival. But this is a caveat to the violently disturbing opacity which, Delany proposes, confronts the human body and identity when leaving a world entirely. Delany's choice to situate the leaving of a world 'at dawn' is a poetic one. 'Dawn' is a word that signifies poetically, contra 'sunrise' or 'sun-up'. As a signifier, 'dawn' is a field of possibility composed of relationships between anexact essences: light, colour, sky; as well as more thing-like yet anexact essences, such as 'musicality' of birdsong, or 'freshness' of morning air. In turn, 'dawn' sustains narrative motion by opening a route for the reader to signifiers of dawn, with which the narrative of 'leaving a world' can be read and visualised poetically. Looking again at the language of the sentences, Delany's word choices also generate an allegorical correspondence between the semiotics of 'dawn' and the fluctuating, often violently fragmenting ('shatter') opacity of human consciousness.

In the above reading, I reveal the allegorical strength of correspondences activated by the poetic usage of a word. I argue that poetic writing, in this way, is an allegorical practice that can be used to stabilise routes toward participation in the motion of the figural, while it lends linguistic stability to the movement of the narrative.

The relationship between language and page

In the context of printed poetry, we learn to see a poem as shape of language against an amount of 'white space', which is important to the way a poem represents both its voice and its motion. The unprinted space around the printed poem participates with the

poem in language, generating a field of possibility.³³ Celan argues that there is a different field of possibility generated when the poem interacts with the page, a field in relation to the language material of the poem:

I beg you to imagine these empty lines [between verse and verse] as spatial, as spatial {—} and—temporal. Thus spatial and temporal, and, for this too I beg you, always in relation to the poem.³⁴

On the page of a novel, the formatting of space on a page is more strictly codified than on the page of a poem, but the page can still participate with the prose in terms of pacing, tone, mood, and voice, such as in dialogue sequences.

Below is Celan's poem 'The Guest' by Paul Celan, translated by David Young, reproduced as it is printed on the page.³⁵ I seek to observe how poetic writing participates with and varies the space around it:

³³ O White, 'Functional White: Crafting Space & Silence' *Poetry Foundation*, 3 November 2015, <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2015/11/functional-white-crafting-space-silence>>, Viewed 15 August 2017.

³⁴ P Celan, *The Meridian*, p. 140.

³⁵ P Celan, *From Threshold to Threshold*, p. 37.

THE GUEST

Long before nightfall
someone who exchanged greetings with darkness
comes to spend the night with you.
Long before daylight
he wakes
and, before leaving, kindles a sleep,
a sleep echoing with footsteps:
you hear him going off, measuring distances,
and you throw your soul
after him.

I observe the space the poem occupies on the page, rather than the poem itself: I observe that the poem I modified and reproduced above is *poeming* its page, making a poem of the page. In its language patterns, I observe a body of sensations in motion. The text as a block shows a pattern of sensations, as does each line and word.

The uninscribed space around the block of text is also poemed, it is part of the poem and participating in its motion, extending as far as the page number, which signals a limit. The page number returns attention to the hierarchical structure of the book. I am looking for where the poem clings and where it lets go, how it moves on the page. The poem is tucked into the upper left of this page, daring to creep across in two lines—and it slips down the page in its anxiety. The poem allegorically represents a field of anxiety, fear, trauma, despair.

Celan argues that ‘Poems are ... the actualizing of something immaterial, language-emanations carried through life-hours, tangible and mortal like us.’³⁶ By participating with a poem using our bodies, by adding the material of physical human form, we generate further possibilities, further routes to encounters with poetic sensations. This aspect of listening is part of paying attention with the poem. For example, Merle Brown argues that the poem’s actualisation in language, its mediating act, is ‘simultaneously an interplay of expressiveness and listening’, such that the poem is at once an expressive device and a way of paying attention to ‘the way that expressiveness is listened to by the poet.’³⁷ In the following example, Celan’s poem both advises and pleads that we listen with our mouths, which is to say, that we pay attention to hear

³⁶ P Celan, *The Meridian*, p. 110; cf. p. 55: ‘Not in the poem that sees itself as “wordmusic”; not in any “mood poetry” woven from various “timbres”; ... [not] in the poem as the result of word-creations, word-concretions, word-destructions, word-games...’

³⁷ M Brown, ‘Poetic Listening’ *New Literary History*, Vol 10, No. 1, Autumn 1978, pp. 128–129.

MH Abrams, ‘The Fourth Dimension of a Poem’, *The Fourth Dimension of a Poem and Other Essays*, WW Norton, New York, 2012, pp. 1–29.

TM Jeannot, ‘A propaedeutic to the philosophical hermeneutics of John Dewey: “Art as experience” and “Truth and method”’, *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2001, p7: ‘[Hans-Georg] Gadamer holds that the being of works of art consists in their being-performed.’

ourselves speak; that we pay attention with our bodies; that we take the poem into our bodies in unexpected ways, such as by speaking a poem aloud, or even by paying close attention to our internal voices:

THE TRUMPET PART
deep in the glowing
lacuna
at lamp height
in the time hole:

listen your way in
with your mouth.

This poem points to another route, the route of listening with the mouth, in addition to listening with language. The material of the human body is at stake for the poem. At first it seems to be shrinking away from the page, as though in fright, but as we pay attention for longer, we sense it is proposing another way to listen. Each word holds open a route toward the plea, and the plea, the poem's extremity, steps back into a corner, off-stage, as it were, thus leaving open the space to the reader to take up. 'This space is for participation,' the poem seems to say: 'Stand here and speak us.' In the context of the page, then, I read this poem as two form-oriented allegories in correspondence. The first is the form of the poem, allegorising the experience of humility within the deep unknowable space of a spatiotemporal hole; and the second is the form of the uninscribed page, which opens the route, for me, to participate in an allegory of physical communion with the body of sensations with which the poem is in motion. Where the poem at the level of language moves opaquely, paying attention to the poem's formal shape, its position on the page, and the relationship between inscribed and uninscribed space can nevertheless give the reader guidance toward meaningful allegorical encounters with the alien or Other, toward which the poem reaches.

What purpose is there for a novelist in this kind of interaction with poetic forms and surfaces? My experiment here is tangential to language, just the slightest touch of attention to the surface of the poem, to see how it ripples. I propose that poetic attention is part of the overall work of conditioning understanding of how material fields of possibility relate to one another; how the field of possibility generated by relationships between sensations, percepts, and affects can interact and be set in motion, with language material, to a desirable creative effect; and how the field of possibility generated by the participation with language can be set in motion with the material of

the page. Thus, in relation to an allegorical practice of writing, it is most useful for me to perceive poetic writing as more than centred around the word, more than wordplay or accumulation, more than syntax and phonetic accumulation, and to argue for poetic writing as the active, ongoing, and mobile interactions of fields of possibility as they undergo actualisations in relation to select materials (language, page, voice, body).

Conclusion

In this chapter I focussed my analysis of Paul Celan's poetics on his use of language and uninscribed page space, so as to improve my understanding of how his poems show the way Celan paid attention to the figural. In doing this, my creative objective was to develop the idea of poetic attention as a strategy for situating and stabilising events of poetic writing in science fiction narratives. Poetic attention has four steps: An effort of intuitive attention leads to an encounter with sensations in motion; participation with this motion draws attention to patterns of intensities in the field of possibility generated by correspondences between sensations; and a correspondent event of poetic writing adds language to the patterns. I argue that this process gives a reader routes or passages toward participatory encounters with the figural.

By examining ways that Paul Celan's poems stabilise representations of the figural, the alien or Other, I improved my understanding of how Celan paid attention to experiences and essences which resist language, which remain unspoken or unspeakable. At the level of language, poetic writing temporarily holds and sustains allegorical correspondences with the figural, and I argue that this stability is available to science fiction writers as well. Samuel R. Delany's use of 'dawn' gives crucial stability to the idea of leaving a world: 'to leave a world, and to leave it at dawn' opens a passage for the reader to participate in the speculative experience of interplanetary

travel, by reading it through the physical experience and familiar signifiers related to 'dawn'.

To explore further the way a poem represents the attention of its author, I looked at the surfaces of two poems by Paul Celan, reading them for how poetic writing makes use of uninscribed page space. I argue that the uninscribed page is in correspondence with the poem's way of paying attention, and so can guide a reader toward encounters with the anexact corporealities toward which the poem reaches with language.

As I develop the idea of poetic attention for science fiction novel writing, I propose to think of poetic writing as an allegorical practice which stabilises representations of the figural in relation to the novum and the narrative. Poetic writing is both the language event during which a way of paying attention to and participating with the figural is represented, and a way of holding open a passage for the reader to have a literal encounter with the figural.

In Chapter Two, 'Patterning language: Paying attention to 'pattern' in T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*', I undertake another surface reading, this time reading across and between instances of the word 'pattern' in the poems of Eliot's *Four Quartets*. This close reading is a way of participating in the poems' variable encounters with patterns in the field of possibility generated by a body of sensations. I am reading for what passes between sensations and language, and what passes between variations of the idea 'pattern', across the surfaces of Eliot's poems.

Chapter Two

Patterning language: Paying attention to ‘pattern’ in T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*

Overview

In this chapter I examine more closely the participatory step of poetic attention, through a close reading of the idea and word ‘pattern’ in T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. I argue that poetic writing is an event of participation, in terms of patterning language material in sympathy with patterns of intensities in a field of possibility generated by the relationships between mobile sensations. I expand on my argument in Chapter One that poetic writing is participatory and uses language to open routes to motion with sensations, as well as new encounters and correspondences within and between fields of possibility. Events of poetic writing actualise the patterns.

In my reading of *Four Quartets*, I refer to ‘surface reading’, a method of literary criticism by which a critic seeks to pay attention to the surfaces of texts, deferring a symptomatic reading. Jewel Spears Brooker argues that in *Four Quartets* Eliot’s focus is ‘not on fragments or experiences or ideas, but rather on relations between them, on the gaps opened by intersection and difference.’¹ This focus on what passes between

¹ JS Brooker, ‘From *The Waste Land* to *Four Quartets*: Evolution of a Method’, in *Words in Time: New Essays on Eliot’s Four Quartets*, E Lobb (ed.), The Athlone Press, London, 1993, p. 90.

ideas and language, what is *en route*, in the correspondences, is what I emphasise in my reading of *Four Quartets* in this chapter.

Reading 'pattern' in *Four Quartets*

Contrasting her reactions to the poems of Rainer Maria Rilke and T.S. Eliot, the poet

Louise Glück writes:

To read Eliot, for me, is to feel the presence of the abyss; to read Rilke is to sense the mattress under the window. The addiction to rapture seems, finally, less a form of abandon than of self-protection.

The goal, in Eliot's monologues, is communion. The problem is that an other cannot be found, or attention secured. Almost all the poems are beset by caution. Sentences falter, major ideas are regularly subordinated, delayed, qualified—Eliot's speakers either can't speak or can't be heard; their persistence makes the poems urgent.²

For me, too, Eliot's poems move urgently in search of communion, and I am compelled by their pain, their persistence and caution, their anxiety and desire for understanding and experience. I pay attention to correspondences between the poems, for example: 'Here is a place of disaffection'³ writes Eliot in the first quartet, 'Burnt Norton'; and, in the last, 'Little Gidding': 'Here, the intersection of the timeless moment / ... Never and always.'⁴ I pay attention across the surfaces of the poems, seeking to condition my understanding of the patterns of sensations which are pre-actual, pre-material; the patterns to which language has been added. I relate this effort to the literary theory of surface reading. A text's surface, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus argue, is 'what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible ... what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*.'⁵ This perspective

² L Glück, *Proofs and Theories*, The Ecco Press, Hopewell, 1994, pp. 21–22.

³ TS Eliot, *Four Quartets*, p. 6.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 36.

⁵ S Best and S Marcus, 'Surface Reading', p. 9.

resists a hermeneutic interpretive approach, and Best and Marcus situate surface reading as an alternative to Fredric Jameson's symptomatic reading practice.⁶

Describing 'other echoes', those other than words echoing in memory, Eliot writes as of the motion of vague corporealities:

There they were, dignified, invisible,
Moving without pressure, over the dead leaves,
In the autumn heat, through the vibrant air...
[...]
There they were as our guests, accepted and accepting.
So we moved, and they, in a formal pattern,
Along the empty alley, into the box circle,
To look down into the drained pool.⁷

'Pattern' here moves slowly, opening a passage for 'formal' to be associated, perhaps out of habit, with elegance, but as well with the formal, stable poetic shape with which 'Burnt Norton' begins. There is a gentle airiness to the way these lines speak, for instance in the 's' sound of 'guests, accepted and accepting'; yet at the same time the poem opens for us a route to encounter a temporal weight bearing on the poet. In the first instance, this can be felt as the weight of time passing; yet at the same time the motion after temporal echoes, as though following the sound of a bird, permits us toward an encounter with nostalgia whose desire for presence cannot be reconciled by a return. I pay attention to the unsettledness in the poet's listening, in the way 'formal pattern' sets the poem along an 'empty alley' into the box circle, the hedge-encircled centre of a formal garden, to look down at a dry, drained pool.

Following routes from 'pattern' to 'pattern' across the surface of 'Burnt Norton', I follow the poem in its correspondence with the poet's body:

The dance along the artery
The circulation of the lymph
Are figured in the drift of stars

⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 2–9.

⁷ TS Eliot, *Four Quartets*, p. 4.

Ascend to summer in the tree
 We move above the moving tree
 In light upon the figured leaf
 And hear upon the sodden floor
 Below, the boarhound and the boar
 Pursue their pattern as before
 But reconciled among the stars.⁸

In this passage, the poem's lines temporarily move in iambic tetrameter, cascading over a pattern of triplets that resolves into an echo: artery/lymph/stars; tree/tree/leaf; floor/boar/before. This phonic reconciliation foregrounds the poet's attention to the way bodies echo one another's motion. This relationship between bodies offers an allegorical route to encounter and participate with the experience of light to which the poet is paying attention. Pulse and the circulation of lymph are echoed in the motion of stars, the source of all light. The phonic resolution in the repetition of 'tree' also offers a route to participate with light upon the tree, upon the leaf, a transitory experience of moving with light as it encounters surfaces. And then in casting our attention down below, to the earth, to the animals of the earth, the poem's language traces patterns made perceptible by the motion of light. By showing such patterns, the poem allegorises the passing of time as a relationship between the body and light, the body and motion, the body and other bodies in Nature. This relationship is always reconciled in motion, change, variation; and motion between bodies in Nature generates fields of possibility allegorised as 'consciousness', which moves with an 'enchainment of past and future / Woven in the weakness of the changing body'.⁹ Language passes across the page like sunlight, showing patterns as it encounters and participates with bodies in motion, and inviting our attention back to the stars, the originators of light and matter, of bodies and motion.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 4–5.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 5

Patterns of sensations offer a perceptual scaffolding for readerly participation in poems, as they offer a scaffolding for events of poetic writing. ‘Words move, music moves’, Eliot provides, but ‘Only in time’; and the poem reminds us that an attentive relationship with language allegorises an attentive relationship with time: ‘that which is only living / Can only die.’¹⁰ These lines lead us to a passage between life and death; between speaking and silence; between the poem and the limit of the page. Patterns of intensities in a body of sensations can be thought of as a variable scaffolding that supports the addition of language. Actualised by the addition of language material and the spatial material of a page, these patterns of intensities temporarily hold open allegorical routes between the body of the reader and the alien or speculative body. For example, ‘the silence’ in the following passage is that silence, as of death, which resists conscious attention and encounter, and its essence is resistance to participation and representation. Bodies of sensations generate an internally consistent field of possibility, allegorical to ‘the silence’; patterns in these bodies of sensations allegorise the way that total silence is temporarily perceptible, like the vague essence of death. These patterns provide a scaffolding for events of poetic writing, to form passages between language and sensations which in their essence vary away from representation:

... Words, after speech, reach
 Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,
 Can words or music reach
 The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
 Moves perpetually in the stillness.¹¹

The pattern stabilises a passage for ongoing, and repeated, encounters with sensations in motion. Change, variation, is the reality of poetic writing; ‘the substantial

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 7.

¹¹ *ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

is only a shadow'.¹² Poetic writing can reach with language toward silence, toward the unspeakable, unrepresentable field of possibility that seems to begin at the limit of consciousness and the desire to speak.

Poetic attention foregrounds paying attention to, and intuitively participating with, the way patterns of sensations represent the motion of sensations in their field of possibility. 'The detail of the pattern is movement,' and the detail of movement is participation.¹³ As a practice of writing, poetic attention structures a formal process that foregrounds productive desiring movement: intuitive attention, encounter (with sensations, with patterns of intensities in sensations), participation, and event of poetic writing. The poem sets out toward the Other, desiring encounters and participation; 'Desire itself is movement', Eliot writes, and allegorical to the movement of intensities after which language circulates, patterning and unpatterning and repatterning, in the body of the poem.

There is a kind of navigation in the way I am moving through the poems of the *Four Quartets* using 'pattern' as a guide. I recognise that I am developing a habit, that I am imposing a pattern on my reading of *Four Quartets* by seeking to read through instances of 'pattern', and in this way I am organising the surfaces of the poems. My effort to develop an allegorical practice of writing, and to make poetic attention a model to make that practice productive, is prone to a similar habituation, and even a deception, in the sense of trying to structure the essential ambiguity of creative composition. It is important to remind myself that the practice I am developing is an allegorical one, and that any effort to structure the ambiguous space of the figural, which is a field of possibility dependent on variable correspondences, is always

¹² C Ricks and J McCue (eds), *The Poems of T.S. Eliot*, p. 921.

¹³ TS Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 8.

insufficient, just as language is insufficient to represent the figural. Thus I argue that structure must be temporary and inconclusive, it must open out onto a repetition of the structuring process that seeks to pay attention again to fields of possibility, seeking new movement in sensations, new patterns. The process of attention, encounter, participation, and writing event must be conducted with the awareness that it is temporary, that it produces temporarily patterning language, and is part of an ongoing conditioning of representational material (language, the page) in relation to fields of possibility generated by figural bodies. In relation to science fiction, as with poetry, the science fiction's genre's support of combination, improvisation, and redefinition complements open-ended, transitory encodings of patterns in language.¹⁴

Moving onward between patterns in *Four Quartets*, I find in 'East Coker' Eliot stresses the 'limited value / In the knowledge derived from experience', since such knowledge:

... imposes a pattern, and falsifies,
For the pattern is new in every moment
And every moment is a new and shocking
Valuation of all we have been.¹⁵

In opening routes toward encounters with sensations of the figural, the alien or Other, the poem represents its own groping forward in language. The pattern, enacted for a moment, permits a temporary participation between language and vague or anexact corporealities. But the pattern is always already exposed as insufficient, and it falsifies any claim to 'knowing'. Knowledge acts on poetic writing as an ordinance or directive, constraining the poem at the level of language, as it strains to follow the directive to become known. Thus knowledge is also the burden under which 'Words

¹⁴ B Attebery and V Hollinger, 'Parabolas of Science Fiction', p. vii: cf. 'jazzlike improvisation'

¹⁵ TS Eliot, *Four Quartets*, p. 15.

strain, / crack and sometimes break'.¹⁶ I contend that poetic writing finds itself only momentarily stabilised, and is compelled in every moment to recapitulate poetic attention to what formed it, what has passed between it and patterns of motion in bodies of sensations. The poem repeats its author's original effort of participatory attention to the figural, accepting that 'every moment is a new and shocking / Valuation of all we have been.'¹⁷ In this way the poem goes on re-composing itself, re-composing the transitory, variable correspondences between its language and the anexact corporealities with which it moves in sympathy.

The author of poetic writing proceeds by grappling and groping onward, stammering and uncertain. The poem seeks its wisdom in unanchored, variable thought and temporary but real encounters, and it finds, as Eliot stresses, 'the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.'¹⁸ For author and poem, humility is the willing return to their shared origin, to unlearn and un-understand, not to make claims, nor to impose structure, but to submit to a repeated practice of starting out again, re-composing for the sake of further encounters. The poem submits to a model, each line starts out again from a beginning, mindful of those that have come before it. In my process of poetic attention, there is an implied repetition of the process, word by word, sentence by sentence: pay attention, organise an encounter, participate with patterning intensities of sensations in motion, add language in patterning events, poetic writing. Poetic humility has an intrinsic sense of repetition, of returning to the problem of insufficiency, and setting out again in search of new ways to represent, to communicate, to condition understanding. To repeat poetic attention is to be always 'still moving / Into another

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 16.

intensity / For a further union, a deeper communion'¹⁹ with how sensations are in motion, with changes and variations in patterns in fields of possibility. I reiterate that poetic attention sustains the effort to condition understanding, in full awareness of the insufficiency of knowing.

But the effort of poetic writing may become laden, and the poet, at some moment, becomes exhausted and abandons language, perhaps when the patterns become overcomplicated, or when language cannot reconcile the complicated pattern of what has come before with what is here now, to be encountered.²⁰ How long can poetic attention be sustained? I conceive of an effort of poetic writing as a strictly local operation, and I do not believe this question has a general answer. In relation to poetic composition, the principal concern of this dissertation, I argue that it can only be answered symptomatically, with the author's attention and intuition, and the dynamics of correspondences between language and the figural in itself, tending to signal points of strain. The general strain is to be balanced against the enrichment that participation in poetic attention and poetic writing can foster. 'Everybody who participates in something does not take something away, so that the others cannot have it,' writes Hans-Georg Gadamer: '[B]y sharing, by our participating in the things in which we are participating, we enrich them; they do not become smaller, but larger.'²¹ Oriented toward participation, poetic attention and poetic writing can be dynamically enriching for the author, and this enrichment becomes available to the reader, though conditional on a sympathetic effort of participation. For me, in writing science fiction, the enriching field of possibility generated by active, ongoing correspondences between allegory and the figural is a more productive authorial focus than the potential strain of

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 20.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 19.

²¹ H Gadamer, 'The Hermeneutics of Suspicion,' *Man and World* 17, 1984, p. 323.

poetic consciousness, which I see as an editorial concern. In my novel writing process, editing is where the strain of poetic writing can be managed, to a point, to stabilise and sustain the enriching effect of language that moves in sympathy with the figural, and to keep the narrative moving toward further encounters with speculative or alien bodies and sensations.

New efforts of attention, encounter, participation, and language event are needed to keep poetic writing close to sensations, which are, in their anexact essences, in continuous variation. Eliot writes: ‘It seems, as one becomes older, / That the past has another pattern, and ceases to be a mere sequence – / ... / Which becomes, in the popular mind, a means of disowning the past.’²² Reading this, I detect an extension of Eliot’s description of the poet’s work, the essential variation of poetic attention, the effort itself:

Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it.²³

The new start is necessary, ‘For last year’s words belong to last year’s language / and next year’s words await another voice.’ And the repeated process of poetic attention which produces transitory routes for between bodies, routes for actualising sensations from their field of possibility into language, becomes the allegorical circulation of the poem. This echoes to me the pattern of the boarhound and the boar ‘reconciled among the stars.’²⁴

With each repetition of poetic attention, I ask myself: Why write poetically? The answer, my argument in this dissertation, is: To pay attention as closely as language

²² TS Eliot, *Four Quartets*, p. 26.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 19.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 5.

allows. Yet I argue that each participatory encounter, each event of poetic writing, must problematise poetic writing again, and find a new allegorical stability in relation to the anexact corporealities with which it is in correspondence. This may be at the word level of language, as one word becomes the problem that the next word addresses. Thus, as a formal allegory of the poetic writing practice, problems that seem to vanish, as composition proceeds, remain, but are transfigured into the coming word. This attentive, variable, transitionally and insufficiently representational way of writing is exacting and productive in itself. Pattern by pattern, Eliot gives the reader a way to participate in the process of stammering onward, groping for new temporary patterns, new ways of paying attention. He uses language to represent the experience of this attentive onward motion, and to hold open allegorical routes between vague, anexact essences and readerly bodies. Pattern by pattern, the poem's own history of itself, its memory, becomes, for Eliot, 'a pattern of timeless moments'²⁵ between words, between lines and stanzas, and across the unscribed spaces on the poems' pages.

The end to an event of poetic writing is a return to the beginning, to pay attention again, conscious that patterning routes represented in language cannot be sufficiently represented, but making the effort anyway. Eliot stresses: '[T]o make an end is to make a beginning. / The end is where we start from. / ... / Every phrase and sentence is an end and a beginning'. Thus, he continues to write poetically by once more participating attentively with what is in motion in passages between bodies, between sensations, between ideas. He writes poetically by continuing to listen poetically, and each event of writing is a new effort to share passages and routes, to write the next phrase and sentence in participation with the last. To write poetically is to use language to stabilising, if always temporarily, an allegorical representation of what emanates in

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 42.

these passages and routes, the voices ‘heard, half-heard, in the stillness / Between two waves of the sea.’²⁶

Conclusion

In my surface reading of ‘pattern’ across the *Four Quartets*, I explored a novel way of reading the way a poem pays attention. My reading mapped a route across the language surface of *Four Quartets*, developing the idea that each event of poetic writing, word by word, becomes the problem addressed by the next word. In this problematic, poetic attention stabilises poetic writing; the steps of poetic attention are attention, encounter, participation, and writing event. My argument contains three related propositions: 1) Poetic writing moves language closer to the figural or anexact, the unspoken, perhaps unspeakable Other, which is estranged from language and resists direct representation; 2) Poetic writing shares the passages and routes of its attentive participation with the attentive and participatory reader; and 3) The event of poetic writing is the beginning of a new effort of poetic attention, whose productive desire, once more, is to move language closer to the figural or anexact.

In making this argument, I am proposing that an allegorical practice of writing is stabilising and productive for a science fiction writer at the level of language, just as an allegorical practice of reading is stabilised in correspondences between new and old texts. I propose that each succeeding event of poetic writing, even word by word, is stabilised by its correspondence with the one before it: the new word is written through the old. In the final chapter of this dissertation, Chapter Three, ‘Poetic attention and poetic writing in *Earthship*’, I examine this proposal in reference to my work on *Earthship*, using examples from the novel to discuss how I have applied lessons from

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 43.

my close readings of poetry to science fiction writing. I show how my ideas concerning poetic attention and the allegorical function of poetic writing helped stabilise the correspondences between narrative and language in *Earthship*, helped me design the larger movements in the novel's structure, and helped stabilise the novel's vague yet consistent narrative voice.

Chapter Three

Poetic attention and poetic writing in *Earthship*

Overview

Earthship is the story of Lasja Zertov's experience of humanness, as a human who has never lived on Earth. Having been born in a wayhole between worlds, Lasja, genetically human, grows up on the planet Serinthea, where her body develops a second, alien circulatory system as a result of prolonged exposure to lys, the planet's viscous moonlight. After a violent purge of Earthlings from Aphrinea, she escapes with her mother's friend Bahar, headed for Earth, through the wayhole where she was born.

In writing *Earthship*, I problematised Lasja's experience of having a human body. I used poetic attention to organise my representation of her humanness, developing events of poetic writing to stabilise the correspondences between Lasja and her mother Satu, and her mother's friends Bahar and Marieta. Growing up, Lasja did not spend much time with these women, but they figure strongly in her family mythos.

At the level of narrative, the vectors that stabilise the correspondences are the alien lel, the lys drug Dream, and Aux, Lasja's neural implant. Taking Aux as an example, this implant is transferred between Lasja's mother's friends, Bahar and Marieta, before being implanted in Lasja. Aux brings into Lasja's consciousness its memory of participating with the bodies of Bahar, Marieta, and Satu. In this chapter, I examine

particular excerpts from *Earthship* to show how poetic attention and poetic writing stabilise my representation of Lasja's humanness, the formal structure of the novel, and the 'vague voice' of the narrative.

Poetic attention and poetic writing in *Earthship*

I began *Earthship* in 2014, and wrote and rewrote it completely, twice, in the ensuing three years, trying to make the narrative pay attention in the manner of a poem. My intention was to write a science fiction novel about a young woman, Lasja, born in a wormhole between worlds and raised on an alien planet, under the light of an alien sun, whose identity as an Earthling woman is bound up in her mother's relationships with two other women, Marieta and Bahar. These relationships are not only passed down in stories and remembrances, they are in Lasja's DNA, by way of the strange alien creature called Ielk, and by way of Aux, an auxiliary brain, a neural implant passed down between Marieta, Bahar, and Lasja. Lasja's inheritance is physical. Her body is both her history and the history of other bodies, an interplay that is palpable in memory, yet of unknown shape. Lasja also inherits her mother Satu's chronic pain, which is a persistent reminder of her human genetic heritage.

Designing the overall structure of *Earthship*, I divided it into five parts, with each part representing, so to speak, a humour of a vague corporeality. I wanted the novel itself to be a body, filled with memories, snapped and rippled by pain, a messy, bruised, inconstant body, and a body in motion. To move toward this goal, I focussed my creative intervention at the level of language, and sought to develop an allegorical practice of writing. This practice is based in paying attention poetically, that is, as a poet pays attention, or as a poem pays attention. To write poetically, then, meant to compose with a poetically attentive gaze. Poetic attention proved a slippery idea, so I

separated it into steps: Intuitive efforts of attention would lead to encounters with poetic sensations, living beings in themselves, moving in their internally consistent field of possibility; then participation with mobile patterns of intensities, which are perceived within the poetically attentive gaze, would invite events of poetic writing, the addition of language to those patterns.

Given this approach, my creative response to the question ‘Why write poetically?’ orbits around the creative possibilities and effects of poetic writing in relation to *Earthship*. The creative effects are oriented toward using poetic writing to stabilise representations of alien or figural corporealities, which in science fiction, as in poetry, are offered to readers as literal. When I write about lelk in Lasja’s body, I am literally representing lelk in Lasja’s body. At the same time, in the context of science fiction, in which an allegorical practice of reading is codified by the evolved megatext, and by fan activity which is often interpretative, lelk can be read allegorically, perhaps as a virus or infection, or as an embodiment of mental illness. Thus, throughout *Earthship* I submit to poetic attention as a model or process oriented toward language effects, as a structural stabiliser, and as a method for stabilising style, tone, language patterns, and refrains, in relation to figural corporealities such as lelk.

Earthship begins with an epigraph from a short essay by the painter Mark Rothko, in which he writes, concerning shapes:

They are unique elements in a unique situation.
 They are organisms with volition and a passion for self-assertion.
 They move with internal freedom, and without need to conform with or
 to violate what is probable in the familiar world.
 They have no direct association with any particular visual experience,
 but in them one recognizes the principles and passion of organisms.¹

¹ M Rothko, ‘The romantics were prompted’ in *Writings on Art*, M López-Remiro (ed.), Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2006, p. 59.

This description helped me to conceive of lelks. Lelks are unique elements, organisms, internally free, without need to conform to the probability field of this world; they vary visually, they vary constantly, but one recognises the behaviour and principles of organisms in them. To write lelks, I used the principles of poetic attention so as to keep language moving, word by word, in shapes of lelks movement. The lelks passages are short, and each word is a transitory representation of the motion of lelks, a calling-forth of lelks from silence into familiar principles of motion. Thus each sentence concerning lelks is allegorical, in the sense that we read lelks through familiar principles of bodily experience, yet understand that they are anexact, and variable in their own internally consistent way. Encountering lelks, the human body participates in generating change oriented to a field of possibility that resists representation. Thus I sought to lean descriptions of lelks toward how it feels to be changed by lelks, vaguely varied. For example, of Satu's experience of lelks, which she encounters by taking the drug Dream, a vector for lelks to enter the human body:

Lelks permitted in Satu the unfolding of an obscure new perseverance, a perseverance native to her body, and yet, she felt, entirely other. Her consciousness spread out a different way, clearer at its edges, and yet the racket of voices in her mind did not abate, lelks did not resolve them. She came to feel instead like a medium or translator between the ghosts of another world and the ghost of herself. Lelks added their emulsions. Lelks made solar systems of her Dream eyes and galactic passages by way of her Dream veins and arteries. While she slept, lelks consumed her bones and rebuilt them, making new lys vessels through the atoms of her new bones, and these they set in motion.

Here I describe lelks by representing their effect on body parts. At the literal level, lelks add emulsions, though the addition is opaque, either an insoluble dispersion or a coating of light-sensitive material, or both; and they make star systems of Satu's eyes, just as in the next sentence they rebuild her bones and circulatory system. Lelks

reconcile Satu's body to their participation. The narrative presents this process as inevitable, but not necessarily menacing. Leik make some kind of leik-human hybrid out of Satu. In representing this poetically, I am corresponding with the idea of physical hybridisation in the science fiction genre, though positioning *Earthship* to one side, where hybridisation is a multi-organism event, and not necessarily horrific. The implication of Satu's pregnancy with Lasja, which is when leik change her body, is that a double-hybridisation is taking place, with Lasja as the implied common body, a kind of temporal pivot: Satu is made hybrid with Lasja and with leik, and Lasja is made hybrid with leik and with Satu.

While language here stabilises a perception of the change in Satu's body, she is also in pain because of this change. My approach to representing pain is to use poetic writing to draw attention to and represent the vague and highly variable sensations of pain. Thus, Satu is always 'in the mouth' of pain, for example, which is also to say that she is in motion with a vague essence, 'painfulness'. This physical experience drastically decays language (Satu has difficulty composing herself to perform her lines for her movie *Coin of the Soul*), and bodily control:

Satu sweated through leik-bitten sleep and woke in the mouth of pain, rising to crack open her seized joints, and leik trickled in and out through them. She could not move slowly or gingerly enough to keep the pain from waking too. She was always in the mouth of something. The pain went on and drove her to Dream, and in Dream it dispersed.

In the narrative more broadly, leik are influential, but not critical, yet at the level of language their intervention is particular, but opaque. They are narrative participants, rather than antagonists in a protagonist/antagonist binary. However, for the characters' bodies, and at the level of language, they are antagonists in the biochemical sense of that word, the sense of a substance that interferes with a body in a physiological way. Leik interfere with physiological action (including mental health); they interpolate

themselves physically into the characters, as well as surfaces, light, and air. The participatory thrust of poetic attention gives me a perspective sensitive to the anexactitude of lelks, and in this perspective I can interfere with language, to allegorise lelks interference with bodies. For example, encountering a scanning light that is searching for humans, lelks encounter the light as though it were a body, as physical an encounter as that with Lasja's body:

They muffled the light and reshaped it, and dispersed it back up through the haze, and the stern, bronze light, curling up to the ceiling, scattered and snowed prettily upon the mist, and through it, down upon the huddled Earthling forms. Lasja's skin paled at its touch. Softer than pollen, lelks too snowed upon them, soundless.

We gain a sense of lelks as pollen-like, but also a sense that there is intelligence there; yet intelligence that interferes for a vague purpose, not necessarily human-friendly. For me, to write about the intent and psychology of an alien form is necessarily to move language toward poetry. I argue that writing about alien psychology and intent involves moving language toward what resists representation in language. This corresponds with the language movement of a poem, which gropes its way toward the unspoken, the unknown.

Poetic attention enters into correspondence with codified, novelistic ways of paying attention that are part of the science fiction genre. For a science fiction novel, narrative objectives are situated and stabilised in correspondence with the genre megatext. In *Earthship*, the Zsk sex scene is an example of correspondence at the level of language and poetic attention. To write poetically about an alien and female human relationship activates, for example, a correspondence with Octavia E. Butler's work, as in her novel *Dawn*. There, the complex sexual encounter is toward rebirth: Lilith's rebirth as alien-human, and the rebirth of a genetically evolved human, to repopulate post-nuclear holocaust Earth.

In *Earthship*, Lasja's affair with the Zsk is offered as an expression of her desire, rather than a narrative problem, although the scene must participate in the overall motion of the narrative. Stylistically, the scene adds to the ways I can write about Lasja. Poetic attention and poetic writing give the reader access to aspects of Lasja's identity, and let the reader participate in the style in which I write about Lasja:

Lasja grew thin. The Zsk lay swollen with her gifted presence. They shared a week of physical exchange, trading the matter of their bodily composition, and then three days of recovery during which the strand of Zsk reunified. Lasja's heart grew fluttery and swift. She wanted desperately to multiply, to differentiate. She craved variations of herself. Reunited, the Zsk called itself *she*, and her name was *Pleasure*. The form she took was bipedal, and she retained four of her soft furrowed glandular limbs as erotic antennae. *Pleasure* took on the scent of jojoba, bergamot, and cinnamon; Lasja grew wet and whole, harder, more expansive. Adding to her long torso a sweet-smelling, colourshifting skin, *Pleasure* begged Lasja—and Lasja allowed her. *Pleasure* pricked Lasja's arms, and with her glandular antennae she coaxed commingled droplets of blood and lys from her skin—and Lasja permitted her. She permitted *Pleasure* to rub her mauve organ up and down her arms, to smear the blood and lys and absorb it until she was quivering with rapture—*shPleeasee*...

In the last week of their affair the strand of Zsk returned to its avian form. It called itself *Love*. In this form it presented Lasja with the incorporeal emotional shape of its calling. This shape, introduced to Lasja through the skin of her throat, pulsed through her lys vessels, through her heart and gut and brain, and unfolded a becoming-creature in her, for which there exists no single word. This creature, neither being nor been, nor will-be, but a becoming added to Lasja—this creature sounded a clear and resonant chord that only she could intuit.

And with this chord the strand of Zsk also exposed in Lasja a private summation of their togetherness—*Comfort, Disgrace, Pleasure, Love—We*.

With this layering of poetic writing over a familiar and human activity, I aim to show the patterns of sensations I pay attention to as I write Lasja, and provide a vocabulary with which to read her as a desiring body undergoing opaque encounters and changes.

Throughout the novel, two persistent narrative devices stabilise the correspondences by which the reader comes to know Lasja. The first is Aux, the auxiliary brain, a personal neural assistant; and the second is Dream, the drug made of lys, a light of variable form and viscosity, which is a natural vector for lelkh to enter the world.

Lasja experiences lelkh as fluctuating intensities of temporal dissociation, with which Aux, her ‘learning companion’², cannot interact. Aux and lelkh are neither synchronous, nor sympathetic. Aux is programmed to interpret, represent, and manage, while lelkh, resisting interpretation and representation, are described by their continuous variation in diverse material durations. Aux, the auxiliary brain that is a physical connection between Lasja, Marieta, and Bahar, is passed between the three women like an heirloom.

Earthship’s use of uninscribed page space is a way to represent the experience of the interaction between Aux and the brain. Lasja experiences this interaction as a fold between her internal voice and silence, so Aux’s ‘spoken’ intrusions into Lasja’s thoughts, for instance, are always short. Uninscribed space in a line or around an unusually brief section also suggests that Lasja’s mental process is close to silence, for example:

People would exclaim:
‘O, Lasja! You look just like your mother!’

In this brief passage, a chapter complete in two lines, language spreads into the uninscribed space, in the manner of a memory suddenly rising into consciousness. In a similar way, at the beginning of *Earthship*, when Lasja and Bahar are hiding as they try to flee Aphrinea, Lasja finds herself in a cross-fire of unknown voices, in addition to

² Aux’s refrain throughout *Earthship* is ‘I am your learning companion.’

Aux's voice. Writing this section, I designed the dialogue around short statements followed by lengths of unscripted space, as well as the visual repetition of Lasja's name (she hears her own name being spoken, from an obscure source). The unscripted space is the muteness or compression that surrounds everything Lasja hears in Aux's voice:

'Mama-cat,' she whispered.
 'Wait,' said Bahar. 'Quiet, wait...'
 'There's lelks.'
Be still, Lasja.
 Old lelks, bold lelks, wandering lelks...
 'Infections! Corpse slime! Mammal shit!'
 The innkeeper appeared at the door again, blue-faced, a fury.
 'All of you get out!'
Lasja...

Dialogue in this section, as throughout *Earthship*, is frequently followed by ellipses which trail into unscripted space. The space takes the echo of what is said and leads it toward silence, so that the lines span even the unscripted page. As Heidegger observes: 'The dots tell what is kept silent.'³ At regular intervals in this opening section of *Earthship*, I repeat Lasja's name, alone on a line, to convey the sense of an a soft, intermittent, obscure pulse. The pulse of lys, or lelks, perhaps; or the pulse of her hybrid body.

I designed the name of the dominant alien species 'lelk' so that, wherever this word was, it would establish a visual boundary between itself and the space around it, with unscripted space between it and other words. 'Lelk' and the lower-case variant 'lelk' have the quality of tallness in any typeface, in the height of the l and the k, and a sharpness the way the 'k' juts out. These features set 'lelk' apart from other words:

³ M Heidegger, 'What Are Poets For?', p. 137.

Morningcrow blew lelkh from her skin.

This conveys a sense of ‘lelk’, as sluggish or even static, able to be blown off skin, and the word, and lelkh themselves, stand out. The following conveys lelkh as moving more swiftly, confidently, even aggressively:

The ship spat another burst of oxygen that shook the crust of lelkh away, but at once they swarmed back. Again and again *Morningcrow* huffed them away. The lelkh seethed and seethed upon him.

Biblical references in *Earthship* also activate an allegorical reading of ‘lelk’ through the familiar idea of ‘hell’. With intuitive attention, I can encounter and participate in the kinds of motion that are generated when I add the word ‘lelk’ to different patterns of intensities in sensations. In the following example, I surround ‘lelk’ with stammering, improvisational language patterns, in an effort to show how lelkh move in and with Lasja’s body, how it feels to be in motion with lelkh:

Bits and scratches, scrapes, loops, echoed scriptures, harmonic dissonance, all came glittered with lelkh to her loofy loamy blot of consciousness, all came with lelkh, as at the moment of her birth, swaddling her and sinking into her, pulsed in lys through her lys vessels, rippled over her Earthling soul. Lelkh, true, sang and called out in her, these stammering wanderers, and wept and wailed in her, too, fog-tongued and near silence, in harmony with the melancholy pall that she had carried with her all her long young life.

Here I allegorise the motion of lelkh by selecting words whose letters offer correspondence between the anexact corporeality of lelkh and the anexact essence of roundedness. I thread the sharper-sounding idea of ‘glittering lelkh’ into the sentence through round vowels and repetitions of the curved letter ‘s’, making a pattern of roundedness on the page: ‘loops’, ‘loofy loamy blot of consciousness’, ‘obscure duration’, ‘fog-tongue’, ‘long young’. In the above event of poetic writing, formal appearance, literal reading, and allegorical representation arise from an organised

participation in correspondences between fields of possibility generated by poetic sensations, sounds, anexact yet rigorous essences, language, and page space.

Taken together, the titles of the five parts of *Earthship* show a formal patterning of the narrative. These titles have a poetic motion:

In two great breaths all young dreams go rushing from her
Take my heart and let it be washed clean
How sweet the silent backward tracings
And these the winds of Heaven scattered, every one, unheard
Marked out across the other plane of Nature's tongue

Earthship problematises bodies in different ways, and in these section titles I have designed the reader's first encounter in the text to be the poetic language which signals the bodiless, vague voice of the narrative.⁴ This voice is recognisable but its source is obscure. The relative grandiosity of the voice in these titles can be read as allegorising the grandiosity of the authorial voice of the King James Version of the Bible. (A possible reading of Lasja's passage to Earth is as a broad allegory of Eve's physical passage out of Eden.) For example, in Genesis 4:14 (King James Version): 'Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond...'

As the novel proceeds, each title, centred alone on an uninscribed page, also functions as an allegorical compass, reorienting the reader in relation to the narrative's perception. In moving their attention outward from the body, from 'go rushing from her', to 'the winds of Heaven', to 'the other plane of Nature's tongue', the titles also offer a subtle counterpoint to the inwardness of Lasja's perception. I believe there is a

⁴ A voice that is anexact yet rigorous; for 'vague' cf. G Deleuze and F Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 407: 'It seems to us that Husserl brought thought a decisive step forward when he discovered a region of *vague and material* essences (in other words, essences that are vagabond, anexact and yet rigorous), distinguishing them from fixed, metric and formal, essences.' Italics in original.

kind of conversation, enacted at the level of language, between the way Lasja pays attention and the way the titles pay attention; between Lasja's inner voices, and the unbodied, vague voice of the narrative.

The commentary of the vague narrative voice is reflected within Lasja's body by the voice of Aux, so that the narrative invites the reader to interpret its intrusions allegorically by reading them, if not necessarily *as* Aux's voice, then *with* Aux's voice. *Earthship* has a variable narrator, not unreliable but inconstant. In the manner of a Greek Chorus, or an aside in a Shakespeare play, the reader is to trust the intrusions as honest observations, even if they are not always narratively enlightening. Yet, they are allegorically productive, and stabilise a way of paying attention to the narrative as a body of poetic movement, moving toward and away from silence. These small interjections, along with the section titles, offer points of weird stability, points of order that orient the narrative's allegorical inclination.⁵ For example, in this passage, Lasja is remembering the dead at Earthship

[O]ver and over she sees them crawling, searching for cover, moon-eyed, frantic, burrowing into the soil... And Sasha the poet is dragged from the château across the rubble and thrown down among the jawless heads and stripped-out guts, and beaten well past death by a monstrous killer, an ogre, blow after blow after blow on his poor sweet head with an ironwood table leg.

Happy shall he be that takes and dashes thy little ones against the stones!

This interjection is a variation on Psalms 137:9, 'Happy *shall he be*, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones.'⁶ And below, a poetic passage from Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*)⁷ folds into Lasja's thoughts:

⁵ 'We need just a little order to protect us from chaos,' argue Deleuze and Guattari. Art is what struggles with chaos 'in order to render it sensory.' G Deleuze and F Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, pp. 203, 205.

⁶ Ps. 137:9, KJV.

⁷ Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura / On the Nature of Things*, trans. WE Leonard, 50 BCE, Internet Classics Archive, <http://classics.mit.edu/Carus/nature_things.1.i.html>, viewed 26 August 2017: 'This terror, then, this darkness of the mind, / Not

I am your learning companion.
 Dire, dire dismay—lump of heartbreak, lump of disarray!
 And there will come a time, she remembered, when the moon is more powerful than the sun—and, too, a time when pure darkness overcomes the moon, when all illumination is obscured and all bodies are drawn toward the void; and this terror, then, this darkness of the mind, no dusk with flaring spokes of light nor glittering arrows of morning can disperse.

These passages are in the ‘vague voice’ of the narrative, and I intend them to function like memories resurfacing. The vague voice functions in the manner of a Greek Chorus, and this is the mode in which Aux communicates, with Aux at times even singing its commentary, in the form of refrains from songs written by Lasja’s father, Jack. Aux brings out the role that Aristotle proposes for the Chorus: ‘The Chorus too should be regarded as one of the actors; it should be an integral part of the whole, and share in the action’.⁸ The vague voice of the narrative enacts in language the uncertain reaching of a poem toward anexact corporealities. This voice also engages in ontological queries, such as in the following observation the narrative makes:

It is hard work for a Dream addict, keeping a body, keeping a consciousness—the sympathy game, keeping the body moving, keeping it straight enough. They do not always remember: Who have you been lately? Who now, and who will become of you? Who among you now will preserve you?

Variations on the phrase ‘It is hard work for a Dream addict, keeping a body’ are a prominent refrain in *Earthship*.⁹ Dream being made of lys, an entirely non-Earth, alien substance, I activate this refrain to wrap it around the subtle idea of Dream as an alien encounter. It is hard work to be an addict; it is hard work to be addicted to an alien body, the Other; and language is addicted, repeating the habit: ‘It is hard work...’ The

sunrise with its flaring spokes of light, / Nor glittering arrows of morning can disperse, / But only Nature’s aspect and her law, / Which, teaching us, hath this exordium: / Nothing from nothing ever yet was born.’

⁸ Aristotle, *Poetics*, XVIII, <<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/a/aristotle/poetics/>>, Viewed 4 August 2017.

⁹ ‘They do not always remember’ refers to the William S. Burroughs story, which is a key inspiration for the tone of *Earthship*. Burroughs’s inclusion in the science fiction megatext, by way of Judith Merrill’s *SF12* anthology in 1968, is my correspondence with the genre here. See: WS Burroughs, ‘They Do Not Always Remember’ in *Exterminator!*, pp. 133–136.

subjective familiarity of the concepts of ‘hard work’ and ‘addict’, and even ‘Dream’, are in motion with the vaguer statement, ‘keeping a body’, with its allegorical orientation toward experiences such as keeping a job, or keeping a pet, or housekeeping.

The vague voice of the narrative always seems to know more, to be on the Other side, the side of what is estranged, but it does not make clear who is speaking, or how.

The narrative voice is the one who observes, and the one reveals:

Thus redeemed, why else but Dream?
It’s not inevitable, it’s easy enough to have slipped into motion with it—break open an orb, this living thing, just like dog, wolf, bear, or even, say, the sentient seas of Ementima. But it is hard work.

Here, again, the representational, ‘break open an orb’, participating with the figural, ‘the sentient seas’, gives the representation of a familiar action an undertone of strangeness and estrangedness. The vague narrative voice, seemingly a voice within the world of the story, observes, reveals, and ultimately structures the narrative.

In situating itself as participant, the vague voice asserts itself in relation to a distributed novum that propels the narrative at its language level. Where the narrative-level novum is *lelk*, which make interstellar travel possible by forming the tunnels that stabilise wormholes, the language-level novum in *Earthship* is the idea of ‘humanness’, in terms of being genetic human Earthling. This is the physical quality which provokes Aym Seil Ilse’s purge of humans from Aphrinea. Humanness in *Earthship* is also related to being removed from Earth, the body’s genetic home, and the possibility of an Earthward return. ‘Humanness’ activates and propels the narrative voice.

The vague voice of *Earthship*’s narrative is variable, and always subject to coming change. I try to represent this by causing the vague voice to show what it sees, literally, while also interpreting it, as the Chorus does, and leaping between ideas, between

characters, seeking to make connections, correspondences in the narrative.¹⁰ I argue that this is a poem-like motion, the way the science fiction narrative is always reaching after correspondences with what remains anexact in itself. The vague voice pays attention poetically, reaching after encounters, desiring to speak the unspoken, perhaps unspeakable alien or Other.

A science fictional point of reference for the idea of an anexact essence being a novum is Philip K. Dick's *A Scanner Darkly*. In this novel, abuse of a drug called Substance D causes Bob Arctor to divide internally between Arctor and Agent Fred, the identity he assumes in work as an undercover narcotics agent. Arctor doesn't recognise Fred on surveillance tapes, because all narcotics agents wear scramble suits to keep them anonymous from one another. The division is a process of 'organic brain damage', Dick stresses.¹¹ Arctor's mind splits in half, and Arctor and Fred occupy one hemisphere each of Arctor's brain, each identity complete in itself.

This split, the divided voice of Arctor/Fred, makes Arctor's mental state a novum: I argue that the split is the radical propellant toward a way of paying attention that is problematised at the level of language. Thus, the representational insufficiency that language experiences corresponds with Arctor/Fred's inability to recognise Fred/Arctor as himself, to sufficiently represent the Other. To one another, Fred and Arctor remain vague corporealities, which propels the novel's way of paying attention in language. The narrative desires representation, but language is repeatedly insufficient to represent the estrangements correspondent with the novum. And the effort of language itself to represent the figural allegorises the effort of Arctor/Fred to resolve the insufficiency of self-representation.

¹⁰ In the passage above, juxtaposing Aux's calm refrain 'I am your learning companion' with 'Dire, dire dismay—lump of heartbreak, lump of disarray!' is an example of my effort in this direction.

¹¹ PK Dick, 'GSM xerox collection', *The Encyclopedia Dickiana*, <<http://1999pkdweb.philipkdickfans.com/The%20Android%20and%20the%20Human.htm>>, Viewed 21 August 2017.

In making Lasja's humanness a novum, *Earthship* is participating in a similar movement. The question of how it feels to have a human body is problematised in terms of how to pay attention to it, and how to speak with and for the body. Attention, in turn problematised in *Earthship* at the level of language, is built up by productive, participatory correspondences. The anexact essence of Lasja's humanness, her becoming-human in relation to her physical Earthward motion, is productively in correspondence with the vague voice of the narrative, and with my allegorical practice of writing. This practice is organised by the process of poetic attention, which produces events of poetic writing: temporary solutions to the problem of how to speak with and for the body. Language represents the anexact both literally and allegorically, though conscious of the insufficiency of this representation. I contend that this is poem-like: the novel is enacting a poetic way of paying attention. Thus, for example, the sentence 'Lelk cling like burrs to your pelt' is both a literal (though temporary) description of actual lelkh behaviour, and an allegorical route to encountering the figural, vague lelkh and the vaguer quality of 'lelkness'. For me, organising these open, incomplete, insufficient routes is a poetic intervention, at the level of language, which makes space for a correspondent poetic narrative: open, incomplete, insufficient, a flowing, folding fabric of routes by which a reader can participate with language in reaching after the unspoken, the alien, the Other.

Conclusion

The compositional problem for *Earthship* is how to write about humanness, the vague and variable quality that is developing in Lasja's body in relation to her Earthward

motion.¹² At the level of language, the problem is how to stabilise representation of her experience of a vague becoming-Other corporeality, as she flees Serinthea.

Allegorical representation at the level of language correspondently stabilises Lasja's broader, narrative-oriented function, insofar as she is a route for encounters with the anexact essence of 'humanness'. In indirect ways, throughout *Earthship*, I enact this problem by representing bodies and vague corporealities in a relationship with Lasja's body:

Lelk, which are part of Lasja's body and circulatory system, owing to her birth in the wayhole, participate in a vague way with Lasja, and the effects of this participation move her body onward in space and time.

Aux, the neural implant, also not quite a helper but rather Lasja's 'learning companion', participates with Lasja's body in specific ways that keep her in motion. Aux being a poor communicator, its participation is hardly more specific than that of Lelk. But the representation of Lasja's experience with Aux stabilises the narrative correspondences between her, Bahar, and Marieta, who had the same Aux implant before her, for periods of time. (Lasja's correspondence with her mother Satu is genetic, and they share a pain body in addition to physical attributes: O, Lasja! You look just like your mother!') Bahar, Marieta, and Satu persist as tracings of identity and memory in Lasja's body. Dream, too, stabilises correspondences between Satu, Jack, Lasja, Bahar, and Marieta, over time. 'It is hard work for a Dream addict, keeping a body,' comments the vague voice of the narrative. The consistency of this observation throughout the novel stabilises the strange temporal dissonances and reverberations that pass between bodies of Dream addicts.

¹² Dick argues that humanness develops as an equation between a person and their situation. See PK Dick, 'The Android and The Human', *ibid*.

In *Earthship*, the vague voice of the narrative pays attention to the alien, the figural, the unspoken, and stabilises events of poetic writing. Poetic writing participates with the narrative, and pays attention itself, at the level of language, to the alien and figural. Efforts to represent the figural in language in turn stabilise new efforts of attention at the level of narrative. Lasja, herself a novum, an activator of narrative motion, is not a Dream addict, but its component substances, lelk and lys, circulate in her natural body. By representing the effects of physical encounters with lelk and lys, thus with Dream, the vague voice of the narrative develops a body, *Earthship* itself, through which readers can participate in Lasja's alienating, estranging, yet still human experience of moving Earthward from Serinthea. In this way, the vague voice of the narrative, participating with Lasja, reaches with its language body toward the anexact corporeality of humanness.

Conclusion

Why write poetically?

To write poetically is to pay attention as a poem pays attention, to listen as a poem listens. This is to pay attention to anexact essences and corporealities, to patterns of motion in bodies of sensations. It is to pay attention to the way sensations are in motion in their self-stabilising fields of possibility, and to encounter and participate with this motion, intuitively, before adding language. Poetic attention guides a writer to participatory events of poetic writing, by which language is made correspondent with patterns of sensations. Poetic writing represents attentive reaching toward vague or anexact corporealities. It strives to represent the figural, the alien or Other, conscious of the insufficiency of language to do this. Repeated efforts to represent the figural form a map of routes for readers to encounter the alien, the Other. For the writer, these are routes toward new efforts of attention, and new events of poetic writing.

In this dissertation I problematised representation in science fiction writing at the level of language, proposing poetic attention as a process to organise and stabilise an allegorical practice of writing. This is a *word*-building practice, in context of science fiction as a practice of *world*-building. Poetic writing as an allegorical practice perceives each word through the attention of the word before it, attention which stabilises the coming word. I argue that an allegorical practice of writing science fiction

can be productively situated in relation to a practice of writing poetry. At the level of language, both poetry and science fiction foreground paying attention to what passes between words and vague, alien, anexact essences or corporealities. Poetry and science fiction find stability in their respective genre codes, which support open-ended, experimental, allegorical writing, and foreground allegorical practices of reading.

Responding to the insufficiency of language to directly represent the figural, poems and science fiction texts give readers routes or passages toward transitory, participatory encounters with the figural, the alien or Other. These encounters are intrinsically variable, and resist representation, or even break down language, as in the case of pain and trauma. In my analysis of Paul Celan's poetics and his use of language and uninscribed page space, in Chapter One, I developed my understanding of how poetic attention gives a reader routes or passages that stabilise transitory, participatory encounters with the figural. Relating this to science fiction, I analysed Samuel R. Delany's use of 'dawn', in a passage from his novel *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*: 'to leave a world, and to leave it at dawn'. To write the speculative through the poetic, I argue, is to compose a transitory, allegorical solution to the problem of representing the speculative. Thus, the experience of leaving a world is stabilised by the familiar signifiers attached to 'dawn'. Celan's poetry also makes use of uninscribed page space, so that the space becomes part of the poem, participating with the poem's way of paying attention.

My close reading of variations in the word and idea 'pattern', across the surface of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, gave me a way to pay attention to patterns of sensations in the field of possibility with which Eliot's language is in correspondence. Reading for what passes between sensations and language, I developed my understanding of poetic attention. Mapping a route from 'pattern' to 'pattern' across the language surface of

Four Quartets helped me to discern variations in how Eliot's poems pay attention, and how poetic attention stabilises poetic writing. I argue that each succeeding event of poetic writing, even word by word, is a new process of attention, a new participation with the figural. As Eliot's poems develop, each successive 'pattern' is stabilised by its correspondence with the one before it. The new word is written through the old.

An allegorical practice of writing foregrounds participatory attention over knowledge, as knowledge is ultimately a false claim of the sufficiency of language to represent the figural. A pattern represented as a way of paying attention, as in Eliot's poems, offers a route toward a participatory encounter with the figural, whereas a pattern represented as a way of knowing limits the necessary repetition of attention, by stabilising representation in its relation to itself. An example of the latter would be a directive or an ordinance. What stabilises the poetic word, I argue, is its attention to and participation with the word or words that came before it. Thus, poetic writing is stabilised in relation to what passes between words, what is in motion at the level of language. The poem's attention, at the level of language, forms an allegorical scaffolding, which stabilises the poem's routes toward encounters with the figural.

In relation to science fiction, an allegorical practice of writing is poetic, in that it stabilises literal representations of what is estranged, alien, or Other, and stabilises specific allegorical passages, such as metaphors. To write about the humanness of an alienated Earthling, as *Earthship* does, in relation to the character of Lasja, is to stabilise representation of a vague or anexact corporeality, 'humanness'. The idea of humanness is also problematised in *Earthship* in relation to chronic pain, which Lasja inherits genetically from her mother, Satu.

At the level of narrative, my solution to the problem of how to write about humanness in *Earthship* is to make Lasja a novum, a radical propellant for the

narrative, and to represent what passes between her body and other bodies. Aux, the neural implant Lasja inherits from Bahar, who inherited it from Marieta, participates with Lasja's body in relation to its memory of participation with Bahar and Marieta's bodies. Aux brings its encounters with humanness to Lasja.

Lelk, the alien corporeality that forms the tunnels of wayholes between worlds, is a part of Lasja's body, owing to her birth in a wayhole. Lelk participate in a vague way with her, influencing her spatiotemporal motion and her identity. Dream, a suspension of lys and lelk, further stabilises Lasja's correspondences with her Dream addict parents, Satu and Jack, and with Bahar and Marieta, also Dream addicts. Lasja does not take Dream, but her body natively circulates lys and lelk, its component substances.

Allegorically, *Earthship* itself is a body, a poetic body with which readers can participate, paying attention and moving along language routes, as one moves in participation with a poem, toward transitory encounters with what remains unknown, unspoken. I write poetically for just this reason: to pay attention like a poem, to organise participatory encounters with what passes between bodies, between my body and bodies of sensations, between sensations and language: to write what passes in-between, *en route* between this word and the next.

Bibliography

The Holy Bible, King James Version (KJV), Bible Gateway,
<<https://www.biblegateway.com>>, viewed 30 August 2017.

Abrams, MH, 'The Fourth Dimension of a Poem' in *The Fourth Dimension of a Poem and Other Essays*, WW Norton, New York, 2012.

Adams, JJ, 'Award-winning authors James Patrick Kelly and John Kessel team up as editors to define a genre that ... well ... *isn't*', *Science Fiction Weekly*, June 12, 2006,
<<https://web.archive.org/web/20060615021123/http://www.scifi.com/sfw/interviews/sfw12963.html>>, viewed 23 August 2017.

Anders, L, 'China Miéville', *The Believer*, April 2005,
<http://www.believermag.com/issues/200504/?read=interview_mieville>, Viewed 3 August 2017.

Anzaldúa, G, *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, A Keating (ed.), Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2009.

Aristotle, *Poetics*, XVIII, <<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/a/aristotle/poetics/>>, Viewed 4 August 2017.

Attebery, B, 'The Closing of the Final Frontier: Science Fiction after 1960' in J Sanders (ed.), *Functions of the Fantastic: Selected Essays from the Thirteenth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts*, Greenwood Press, Westport, 1995, pp. 205–213.

Attebery B, and V Hollinger (eds), *Parabolas of Science Fiction*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, 2013.

Attebery, B and V Hollinger, 'Parabolas of Science Fiction' in B Attebery and V Hollinger (eds) *Parabolas of Science Fiction*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, 2013, pp. vii–xiv.

Attebery, B, 'Science Fictional Parabolas: Jazz, Geometry, and Generation Starships' in B Attebery and V Hollinger (eds), *Parabolas of Science Fiction*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, 2013, pp. 16–33.

Auster, P, *The New York Trilogy*, Faber and Faber, London, 1987.

Ballanche, P, *L'Homme sans nom: épisode de 1793*, Le Normant, Paris, 1832, <<https://books.google.com.au/books?id=fcT6bpN0FN8C>>, Viewed 18 March 2017.

Barthes, R, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. A Lavers and C Smith, Hill and Wang, New York, 1968.

Beaulieu, A, 'Edmund Husserl' in *Deleuze's Philosophical Lineage*, G Jones and J Roffe (eds), Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2009, pp. 261–281.

Bernstein, C, 'Paul Celan's Folds and Veils' in *Pitch of Poetry*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2016, pp. 113–119.

Berger, J, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*, Vintage International, 1991.

Bergson, H, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. TE Hulme, GP Putnam's Sons, New York and London, 1912, <<https://archive.org/details/anintroductiont00berggoog>>, Viewed 4 March 2017.

Bergvall, C, *Drift*, Nightboat Books, Brooklyn and Callicoon, 2014.

Best, S and S Marcus, 'Surface Reading: An Introduction', *Representations*, no. 108, 2009, pp. 1–21.

Bierschneeman, 'Sci-fi or fantasy, or sci fan?', *Best Fantasy Books Forum*, <<http://bestfantasybooks.com/forums/threads/sci-fi-or-fantasy-or-sci-fan.3181/>>, Viewed 2 August 2017.

Blanchot, M, 'The Sleep of Rimbaud' in *The Work of Fire*, trans. C Mandell, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1995.

Blattmann, C (ed.), *Georg-Büchner-Preis*, Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung, Darmstadt, <<https://www.deutscheakademie.de/en/awards/georg-buechner-preis>>, Viewed 19 February 2017.

Bourdieu, P, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1984.

Brooker, JS, 'From *The Waste Land* to *Four Quartets*: Evolution of a Method' in *Words in Time: New Essays on Eliot's Four Quartets*, E Lobb (ed.), The Athlone Press, London, 1993, pp. 84–106.

Brown, M, 'Poetic Listening', *New Literary History*, Vol 10, No. 1, Autumn 1978, pp. 125–139.

Buber, M, *I and Thou*, trans. RG Smith, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1937.

Buchanan, I, *Deleuzism: A Metacommentary*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2000.

Burroughs, WS, *Nova Express*, Grove Press, New York, 1964.

Burroughs, WS, *The Soft Machine*, Grove Press, New York, 1992.

Burroughs, WS, 'They Do Not Always Remember' in *Exterminator!*, The Viking Press, New York, 1973, pp. 133–136.

Burroughs, WS, 'William S. Burroughs class on writing sources, July, 1976', Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, 1976,
<https://archive.org/details/Burroughs_class_on_writing_sources_July_1976_76P020>,
viewed 23 August 2017.

Butler, OE, *Dawn*, Warner Books, New York, 1987.

Celan, P, *Dankrede (Der Meridian)*, Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung, Darmstadt, available from <https://www.deutscheakademie.de/en/awards/georg-buechner-preis/paul-celan/dankrede>, Viewed 19 February 2017.

Celan, P, *Collected Prose*, trans. R Waldrop, Carcanet, Manchester, 1986.

Celan, P, *Selected Poems*, trans. M Hamburger, Penguin Books, London, 1996.

Celan, P, *Glottal Stop: 101 Poems by Paul Celan*, trans. N Popov and H McHugh, Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, Hanover, 2000.

Celan, P, *Selections*, P Joris (ed.), University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2005.

Celan, P, *Schneepart / Snow Part*, trans. I Fairley, Carcanet, Manchester, 2007.

Celan, P, *Von Schwelle zu Schwelle / From Threshold to Threshold*, trans. D Young, Marick Press, Grosse Point Farms, 2010.

Celan, P, *The Meridian: Final Version—Drafts—Materials*, trans. P Joris, B Böschenstein, H Schmull, M Schwarzkopf and C Wittkop (eds), Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2011.

Celan, P, *Breathturn into Timestead: The Collected Later Poetry*, trans. P Joris, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2014, electronic edition.

Chalfen, I, *Paul Celan: A Biography of his Youth*, trans. M Bleyleben, Persea Books, New York, 1991.

Chiang, T, *Stories of Your Life and Others*, Electronic edition, Picador, London, 2015.

Clay, J, *Sensation, Contemporary Poetry and Deleuze: Transformative Intensities*, Continuum, London, 2010.

Collins, B, 'Monday', weblog, 18 March 2016,
<<https://www.panmacmillan.com/blogs/picador/monday-by-billy-collins>>, viewed 22 August 2017.

Creeber, G, 'Genre Theory' in G Creeber (ed.), *The Television Genre Book*, 3rd Edition, Palgrave/British Film Institute, London, 2015, pp. 1–13.

Delany, SR, *The Einstein Intersection*, Bantam Books, New York, 1967.

Delany, SR, *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, 1984.

Delany, SR, 'Some Notes for the Intermediate and Advanced Creative Writing Student' in *About Writing: Seven Essays, Four Letters, and Five Interviews*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, 2005, electronic edition.

Deleuze, G, 'The Method of Dramatisation', *Bulletin de la Société française de Philosophie*, Vol. LXII, 1967, pp. 89–118.

Deleuze, G, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. R Hurley, City Lights Books, San Francisco, 1988.

Deleuze, G, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. P Patton, Columbia University Press, New York, 1995.

Deleuze, G, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. DW Smith, Continuum, New York, 2003.

Deleuze, G, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. DW Smith, unpublished manuscript.

Deleuze, G and F Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. B Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987.

Deleuze, G and F Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. H Tomlinson and G Burchill, Verso, London, 1994.

Deleuze, G and F Guattari, F, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. R Hurley, M Seem and HR Lane, Penguin Books, London, 2009.

Deleuze, G and C Parnet, *Dialogues II*, trans. H Tomlinson and B Habberjam, Continuum, London, 2002.

Dick, PK, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? Filmed as Blade Runner*, Millennium, London, 1999.

Dick, PK, 'The Android and the Human', *The Encyclopedia Dickiana*,
<<http://1999pkdweb.philipkdickfans.com/The%20Android%20and%20the%20Human.htm>>, Viewed 21 August 2017.

Dick, PK, 'GSM xerox collection', *The Encyclopedia Dickiana*,
<<http://1999pkdweb.philipkdickfans.com/The%20Android%20and%20the%20Human.htm>>, Viewed 21 August 2017.

Eddington, AS, *Space Time and Gravitation: An Outline of the General Relativity Theory*, Cambridge University Press, London, 1920.

Egan, G, *Permutation City*, Night Shade Books, New York, 2014.

Eliot, TS, *Four Quartets*, Faber and Faber, London, 2001.

Felstiner, J, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1995.

Fiske, J, 'The Cultural Economy of Fandom' in LA Lewis (ed.), *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, Routledge, New York and London, pp. 30–49.

Fowler, A, 'Writing Criticism and Making Poems', *New Literary History*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1989, pp. 1–15.

Fowlie, W, 'Introduction' in *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters*, trans. W Fowlie, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005, p. xxxi–xxxvi.

Frank, E, A McCord, and R Fitzgerald, 'Robert Fitzgerald: The Art of Translation No.1,' *Paris Review*, Issue 94, Winter 1984,
<<https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2928/robert-fitzgerald-the-art-of-translation-no-1-robert-fitzgerald>>, Viewed 6 February 2017.

Gadamer, H, 'The Hermeneutics of Suspicion', *Man and World* 17, 1984, pp. 313–323.

Gadamer, H, *Gadamer on Celan: 'Who Am I and Who Are You?' and Other Essays*, trans. R Heinemann and B Krajewski, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1997.

Gadamer, H, *Truth and Method*, trans. J Weinsheimer and DG Marshall, Continuum, London, 2004.

Glissant, É, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. B Wing, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1997.

Glück, L, *Proofs and Theories*, The Ecco Press, Hopewell, 1994.

Graham, WS, *New Collected Poems*, M Francis (ed.), Faber and Faber, London, 2005.

Grosz, E, 'The Problem of Theory', *theory@buffalo*, no. 5, 1999, pp. 2–16.

Harris, O, "'Burroughs Is a Poet Too, Really': The Poetics of *Minutes to Go*", *Reality Studio*, <<http://realitystudio.org/scholarship/burroughs-is-a-poet-too-really-the-poetics-of-minutes-to-go/>>, viewed 23 August 2017.

Heidegger, M, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A Hofstadter, HarperCollins, New York, 1971.

Heidegger, M, 'What Are Poets For?' in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A Hofstadter, HarperCollins, New York, 1971, pp. 87–139.

Henry, L, 'Doris Piserchia's science fiction novels', *Feminist Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Utopia*, L Quilter (ed.), <<http://feministsf.org/authors/piserchia/novels.html>>, viewed 24 August 2017.

Hill, L, "'Distrust of poetry': Levinas, Blanchot, Celan", *MLN*, vol. 120, no. 5, 2005, pp. 986–1008.

Hofer, J, 'Deterritorializations: Patterning and Incongruities', *Harriet*, 24 April 2013, <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2013/04/deterritorializations-patterning-and-incongruities/>>, viewed 14 March 2014.

Horace, *The Complete Odes and Epodes with the Centennial Hymn*, trans. WG Shepherd, Penguin Books, London.

Jameson, F, 'Metacommentary', *PMLA*, vol. 86, no. 1, 1971, pp. 9–18.

Jameson, F, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1981.

Jameson, F, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, Verso, London and New York, 2005.

Jameson, F, *Jameson on Jameson: Conversations on Cultural Marxism*, I Buchanan (ed.), Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2007.

Jeannot, TM, 'A propaedeutic to the philosophical hermeneutics of John Dewey: "Art as experience" and "Truth and method"', *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2001, pp. 1–13.

Joris, P, 'Introduction' in P Celan *Breathturn into Timestead: The Collected Later Poetry*, trans. P Joris, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2014, electronic edition.

Joris, P, 'Nimrod in Hell' in *Permanent Diaspora*, Duration Press, 2002, pp. 23–25 available from http://www.durationpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Joris-Pierre_Permanent-Diaspora.pdf, Viewed 7 August 2017.

Joris, P, and L Schwartz, *Cross Cultural Poetics*, Episode 259, <<http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Joris.php>>, viewed 13 August 2017.

Kandinsky, W, 'Yesterday—Today—Tomorrow' ['Gestern—Heute—Morgen'] in KC Lindsay and P Vergo (eds) *Kandinsky: Complete writings on art, Volume Two (1922–1943)*, G.K. Hall & Co. (Faber and Faber), London, 1982.

Keats, J, *Letters of John Keats to His Family and Friends*, S Colvin (ed.), Project Gutenberg, 2011, < <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/35698/35698-h/35698-h.htm>>, Viewed 25 June 2013.

Knapp, S and WB Michaels, 'Against Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 8, no. 4, 1982, pp. 723–742.

Kubrick, S, dir, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, MGM, Stanley Kubrick Productions, Beverly Hills, CA, 1968.

Lasbalestier, J (ed.), *Daughters of Earth: Feminist Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, 2006.

Lash, S, 'Experience', *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 23, 2006, pp. 335–341.

Latour, B, 'Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2004, pp. 225–248.

Lawrence, DH, 'Chaos in Poetry' in *Selected Literary Criticism*, A Beal (ed.), Heinemann Educational Books, London, 1956.

Lévinas, E, *Proper Names*, trans. MB Smith, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1997.

Lewis, D, *On the plurality of worlds*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 1986.

Lewis, D, 'How many lives has Schrödinger's cat? The Jack Smart lecture, Canberra, 27 June 2001', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 82, no. 1, 2004, pp. 3–22.

Lispector, C, *Água Viva*, trans. S Tobler, B Moser (ed.), Penguin Classics, London, 2014.

Little, JA, *Feminist Philosophy and Science Fiction: Utopias and Dystopias*, Prometheus Books, Amherst, 2007.

Love, H, 'Close But Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn', *New Literary History*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2010, pp. 371–391.

Love, H, 'Truth and Consequences: On Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', *Criticism*, vol. 52, no. 2, 2010, pp. 235–241.

Lucas, G, dir, *Star Wars: Episode IV — A New Hope*, Lucasfilm, Twentieth Century Fox, San Francisco, CA, 1977.

Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura / On the Nature of Things*, trans. WE Leonard, 50 BCE, Internet Classics Archive, <http://classics.mit.edu/Carus/nature_things.1.i.html>, viewed 26 August 2017.

Mayakovsky, V, *How are Verses Made?* trans. GM Hyde, Jonathan Cape, London, 1970.

Merril, J (ed.), *SF12*, Delacorte Press, New York, 1968.

Miller, H, *The Time of the Assassins*, New Directions, New York, 1962.

Neale, S, 'Questions of Genre' in BK Grant (ed.), *Film Genre Reader II*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1995.

Papke, ME, 'A Space of Her Own: Pamela Zoline's "The Heat Death of the Universe"' in J Lasbalestier (ed.), *Daughters of Earth: Feminist Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, 2006, pp. 144–159.

Patke, RS, 'Poetic Knowledge' *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 23, 2006, pp. 199–205.

Pasero, C and M McCaffery, *Pain Assessment and Pharmacologic Management*, Mosby Elsevier, St Louis, 2011.

Pasternak, B, *A Quatrain on Sleeping Beauty's Tomb*, trans. W Benton, Cove House Press, 2011.

Perloff, M, *Edge of Irony: Modernism in the Shadow of the Habsburg Empire*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2016.

Peterkiewicz, J, *The Other Side of Silence: The Poet at the Limits of Language*, Oxford University Press, London, 1970.

Piserchia, D, *Star Rider*, Bantam Books, New York, 1974.

Plath, S, *Collected Poems*, Faber and Faber, London, 1981.

Plessen, J, 'The Tribulations of the Alexandrine in the Work of Rimbaud: A Contest Between Innovation and Convention' in *Convention and Innovation in Literature*, T d'Haen, RG Grübel, H Lethen (eds), John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 1989, pp. 253–272.

Poe, EA, *Eureka: A Prose Poem*,

<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/p/poe/edgar_allan/p74eu/>, Viewed 2 August 2017.

Pomeroy, AF, 'Process Philosophy and the Possibility of Critique', *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2001, pp. 33–49.

Popov, N, and H McHugh, 'Preface' in P Celan *Glottal Stop: 101 Poems by Paul Celan*, trans. N Popov and H McHugh, Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, Hanover, 2000, pp. xi–vxiii.

Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, Letter 6.20, trans. B Radice,

<<http://www.u.arizona.edu/~afutrell/404b/web%20rdgs/pliny%20on%20vesuvius.htm>>, Viewed 2 August 2017.

Ricks, C and J McCue (eds), *The Poems of T. S. Eliot Vol I: Collected and Uncollected Poems*, Faber and Faber, London, 2015.

Rimbaud, A, *Le Bateau ivre / Das Trunkene Schiff*, trans. P Celan, Insel Verlag, Frankfurt a.M. und Leipzig, 2008.

Rimbaud, A, *A Season in Hell / Une saison en enfer & The Drunken Boat / Le bateau ivre*, trans. L Varèse, New Directions, New York, 2011.

Rimbaud, A, *Illuminations*, trans. J Ashbery, WW Norton & Company, New York, 2011.

Rose, S, 'When it comes to interracial romances, the movies need to catch up', *The Guardian*, 13 May 2016, <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/12/when-it-comes-to-interracial-romances-the-movies-need-to-catch-up>>, viewed 21 August 2017.

Rothko, M, 'The romantics were prompted' in *Writings on Art*, M López-Remiro (ed.), Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2006, pp. 58–59.

Samuelson, A (ed.), *Exoplanet Exploration: Planets Beyond our Solar System*, Jet Propulsion Laboratory, California Institute of Technology, <<https://exoplanets.nasa.gov>>, Viewed 25 February 2017.

Scarry, E, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1985, electronic edition.

Sedgwick, E, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2003.

Sexton, A, *Love Poems*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1969.

Simic, C, 'Notes on Poetry and Philosophy' *New Literary History*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1989, pp. 215–221.

Smith, DW, 'Deleuze and the Question of Desire: Toward an Immanent Theory of Ethics' *Parrhesia*, no. 2, 2007, pp. 66–78.

Smith, DW, *Essays on Deleuze*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2012.

Sontag, S, 'Against Interpretation' in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, Picador/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1966, pp. 1–14.

Spinoza, B, *Ethics*, trans. E Curley, Penguin Books, London, 1996.

Stark, R, *Ezra Pound's Early Verse and Lyric Tradition: A Jargonier's Apprenticeship*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2012.

Stephensen-Payne, P (ed.), 'The FictionMags Index: Burroughs, William S(eward)', *Galactic Central*, <<http://www.philsp.com/homeville/FMI/s/s1367.htm#A25914>>, viewed 23 August 2017.

Stickers, KW, 'Royce and Gadamer on Interpretation as the Constitution of Community' *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2001, pp. 14–19.

Strugatsky, A and B Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*, Orion, London, 2007.

Suvin, D, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1979.

Szondi, P, 'Introduction to Literary Hermeneutics' *New Literary History*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1978, pp. 17–29.

Thiess, DJ, *Embodying Gender and Age in Speculative Fiction: A Biopsychosocial Approach*, Routledge, New York and London, 2016.

Tsvetaeva, M, 'The Poet and Time' in *Art in the Light of Consciousness*, trans. A Livingstone, Bloodaxe Books, Highgreen, 2010, pp. 87–103.

Tucker, B, 'Rebuke: From Trope to Event in Paul Celan's "Zähle die Mandeln"' *German Quarterly*, vol. 86, no. 3, 2013, pp. 257–274.

Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. R Fitzgerald, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1985.

Wark, M, 'The Empty Chair: On Reading Jameson', *Public Seminar*, 31 October 2014, <<http://www.publicseminar.org/2014/10/the-empty-chair-or-reading-jameson>>, Viewed 9 August 2017.

White, O, 'Functional White: Crafting Space & Silence' *Poetry Foundation*, 3 November 2015, <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2015/11/functional-white-crafting-space-silence>>, Viewed 15 August 2017.

Wilde, F, 'Ten Authors on the 'Hard' vs. 'Soft' Science Fiction Debate', *Tor.com*, 20 February 2017, <<http://www.tor.com/2017/02/20/ten-authors-on-the-hard-vs-soft-science-fiction-debate>>, Viewed 2 August 2017.

Wrathall, M, *Later Heidegger*, Personal lecture notes, Melbourne School of Continental Philosophy, Melbourne, 2013.

Young, D, 'Introduction' in P Celan, *Von Schwelle zu Schwelle / From Threshold to Threshold*, trans. D Young, Marick Press, Grosse Point Farms, 2010, pp. vii–xxii.

Zoline, P, 'The Heat Death of the Universe' in J Lasbalestier (ed.) *Daughters of Earth: Feminist Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, 2006, pp. 130–143.